NATION

Navy speedboat driver's stunt ended in mid-sea tragedy

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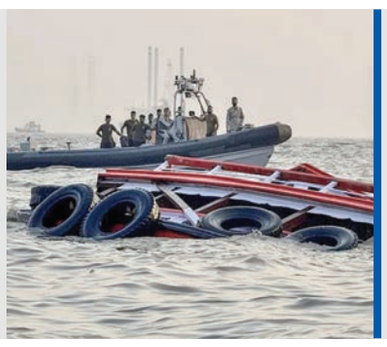

BUSINESS

Mkt slumps on US Fed's fewer rate cuts next year

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SPORTS

India to play matches at neutral venue in CT

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Parl hits new low as MPs come to blows

BJP accuses Rahul of 'gundagardi' as two BJP MPs are admitted to ICU with injuries

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Plumbing new depths of political animosity, rival MPs screamed and shoved in the forecourt of Parliament on Thursday in unprecedented scenes of unruliness, capping three days of acrimonious debate inside the House over preserving the dignity of BR Ambedkar.

Two BJP MPs were hospitalised in ICU with injuries as Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi became the centre of the ruling party's accusations, including one by a woman MP who said he misbehaved with her.

NDA leaders filed a police complaint against him for "attempt to murder, physical assault and incitement". The Delhi Police registered an FIR against Rahul

The sordid incident perhaps without parallel started in the morning as MPs of the NDA were protesting at the steps of Parliament's 'Makar Dwar', an entrance and exit reserved for lawmakers, against Congress' alleged insult of Ambedkar, while MPs from Congress and its allies were demonstrating over Union Minister Home Amit Shah's remarks on Ambedkar and accused BJP of slighting the architect of the Constitution. As the BJP MPs and opposition MPs marched towards each other tempers and voices rose, soon resulting in a melee.

Rahul Gandhi takes cursory look at the injured MPs **PHOTO: PTI**

BJP MPs claimed that Rahul tried to push his way inside Parliament through the middle of the stairs where they were standing, ignoring a side passage, and caused injuries in the ensuing jostling.

However, Opposition MPs claimed that BJP members refused to give way to Rahul who was heading to the Lok Sabha to attend the House proceedings.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said he was pushed so violently that he lost his balance and sat down. "Now they are the ones who are accusing us of shoving them," the 82-year-old said.

However, the more apparent injuries were sustained by BJP's Balasore MP Pratap Sarangi, 69, who had to get stitches in the temple.

His colleague Mukesh Rajput was also injured in the head.

BJP member Nishikant Dubey accused Gandhi of pushing Sarangi. "Are you not ashamed Rahul, you are resorting to rowdy behaviour ('gundagardi'). You pushed an old man," a furious Dubey told Gandhi.

"He pushed me," Rahul countered Dubey, walking off after having a cursory look at Sarangi, who was being attended to by fellow BJP members. Sarangi was later wheeled off to an ambulance.

"BJP MPs stopped, threatened and intimidated me," Rahul said. Modi called MPs Pratap Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput to inquire about their health after they sustained head injuries.—*PTI*

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BJP MP Pratap Chandra Sarangi on a wheelchair being taken to a hospital after he got injured during a protest in Parliament. He later got stitches **PHOTO: PTI**

Impeachment notice against VP dismissed

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Harivansh has dismissed an impeachment notice against Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, labelling it an act of impropriety and a deliberate attempt to tarnish his reputation. In a ruling presented in the House by Rajya Sabha Secretary General PC Mody, Harivansh described the notice, signed by at least 60 Opposition members on 10 December, as fundamentally flawed and drawn up hastily.

The Opposition had accused Dhankhar of bias and expressed a lack of trust in his role. The notice was filed under Article 67(b) of the Constitution, which is linked to no-confidence motions against the Vice President. However, Harivansh pointed out that the notice failed to meet the legal requirement of a minimum 14-day advance notice for any resolution proposing removal. He highlighted that the current parliamentary session ends on 20 December, rendering the impeachment effort procedurally untenable during this period.

Jagdeep Dhankhar **PHOTO: PTI**

The Deputy Chairman's ruling emphasised that the notice was aimed at discrediting the Vice President and the integrity of constitutional offices. He further noted that there appeared to be a coordinated media campaign surrounding the notice, initiated by the Leader of the Opposition and the Chief Whip of the Indian National Congress. Harivansh's decision follows a precedent set in 2020 when a similar notice against the Deputy Chairman was rejected for procedural impropriety. —*PTI*

SC directs UP, Haryana to ban firecrackers

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Supreme Court on Thursday directed the Uttar Pradesh and Haryana governments to impose a complete ban on firecrackers until further orders. A bench comprising Justices A S Oka and Augustine George Masih was also informed that GRAP IV was restored in Delhi-NCR due to the worsening air quality. The bench noted the Delhi government had enforced a complete ban on the manufacture, storage and sale, including delivery of firecrackers through online marketing round the year with immediate effect. The apex court was hearing a plea filed by M C Mehta in 1985 seeking directions to curb air pollution in the national capital and adjoining areas.—*PTI*

Strict law are for women's welfare: SC

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Supreme Court on Thursday said the strict provisions of law were for the welfare of women and not means to "chastise, threaten, domineer or extort" their husbands. Justices BV Nagarathna and Pankaj Mithal observed a Hindu marriage was considered to be a sacred institution, as a foundation for a family and not a "commercial venture". Notably, the bench ob-served the invocation of IPC sections including rape, criminal intimidation and subjecting a married woman to cruelty -- as a "combined package" in most of the complaints related to matrimonial disputes -- was condemned by the top court on several occasions. —*PTI*

Protected Area Permit imposed in Manipur & 2 states

IMPHAL, 19 DEC

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has reimposed the Protected Area Permit (PAP) in three north-eastern states – Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram – in view of security concerns arising out of influx from neighbouring countries, a statement issued by the Manipur government has said. The statement issued late on Wednesday night said, "With this reimposition, the movement of foreigners visiting Manipur will be closely monitored, and they are required to obtain the necessary Protected Area Permit in accordance with the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958." . —*PTI*

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Mallya says he has paid double the amount he owed

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Fugitive businessman Vijay Mallya has announced his intention to challenge claims made by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and various banks, which he states have recovered more than double the debt he owed. His comments follow Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's recent statement in Parliament, declaring that over Rs 14,130 crore has been recovered from Mallya's attached assets. In a series of posts on the social media platform X, Mallya outlined that the Debt Recovery Tribunal had determined the debt from his Kingfisher Airlines (KFA) at Rs 6,203 crore. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 4

CT Ravi arrested for insulting Hebbalkar

BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

Senior BJP lawmaker CT Ravi was arrested Thursday amid uproarious scenes at the Suvarna Vidhana Soudha after he was accused of abusing Minister Lakshmi Hebbalkar inside the Legislative Council.

The incident occurred following an uproar over comments made by Union Home Minister Amit Shah about BR Ambedkar.

The police confirmed that Ravi was taken away in a police van from the premises of Suvarna Vidhana Soudha, based on a complaint filed by Hebbalkar. The police arrested Ravi from the state's second secretariat on charges of sexual harassment and insulting the modesty of a woman based on a complained by Hebbalkar. Ravi called the claims "false."

He urged for the verification of audio and video evidence.

CT Ravi **PHOTO: FB**

Ravi, while defending Shah, allegedly called Rahul Gandhi a "drug addict". Countering him, Hebbalkar shouted Ravi was a "murderer" and that he had run over and killed a man while driving his car. In the ensuing war of words, Ravi allegedly used a derogatory word multiple times. Hebbalkar's supporters, who stormed into Suvarna Vidhana Soudha and tried to attack Ravi, were detained. —*Agencies*

UNKNOWN ILLNESS KILLS 8 IN RAJOURI

RAJOURI/JAMMU, 19 DEC

The death toll from an unknown illness in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri has risen to eight, with another child succumbing to the mysterious disease in a hospital here on Wednesday, prompting authorities to set up a central team of experts to assist in investigating the cases. A Biosafety level 3 (BSL-3) mobile laboratory has been dispatched to Rajouri to expedite testing and identify the illness, officials said Twelve-year-old Ashfaq Ahmed, son of Mohammad Rafiq, passed away after being hospitalised at the Government Medical College (GMC) Jammu for six days, officials said. —*PTI*

SUPPORT FOR AMBEDKAR

Congress MLAs keep pictures of BR Ambedkar in the Assembly during the Winter Session in Belagavi to protest against HM Amit Shah's remarks **PHOTOS: SALAR**

Without Ambedkar, Shah would've been scrap dealer: CM

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BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

Stepping up the attack against Union Minister Amit Shah for his comments on B R Ambedkar in Parliament, senior Congress leader and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Thursday claimed that Shah would have been a "Gujari" (scrap dealer) if there wasn't Ambedkar's Constitution.

He further said that if Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar was really functioning under the Constitution, he should have immediately suspended Shah from the House.

Reading out a statement in the Assembly amid din by both BJP and the Congress MLAs over the issue, Siddaramaiah said there is nothing surprising in the words spoken by Shah as the minds of BJP and Sangh Parivar leaders has come out in the open.

"I congratulate Shah for openly revealing the innermost opinion of the BJP about Babasaheb Ambedkar before the country and for finally telling the truth in your lifetime," he said. He alleged that the main reason behind BJP and Sangh Parivar's hatred for Ambedkar was the Constitution. "Until this written Constitution came into force, the Indian society had the Manusmriti, which made caste and gender discrimination a law. Ambedkar, who hoped for freedom, equality and fraternity, not only gave the Constitution, but he also burned the unwritten Constitution Manusmriti," he said. —*PTI*

5 TERRORISTS KILLED IN KULGAM ENCOUNTER

SRINAGAR, 19 DEC

In a significant engagement, five terrorists from the Hizbul Mujahideen, including a self-styled top commander, were killed during an encounter with security forces in Kulgam district, Jammu and Kashmir, on Thursday.

According to officials, the operation commenced in the early hours after intelligence indicated the presence of suspected militants in the Kadder area of Behibagh. Following a cordon and search operation launched late on Wednesday, the situation escalated into an encounter when the terrorists opened fire on the advancing security personnel, who promptly retaliated.

The deceased include Farooq Ahmad Bhat, known as Nali, identified as a commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen and implicated in numerous terror-related activities in southern Kashmir. The other terrorists have been named as Irfan Lone, Adil Hussain, Mushtaq Itoo, and Yasir Javaid, all local residents.

During the operation, two members of the security forces sustained injuries. Local police have advised residents to refrain from approaching the encounter site due to safety concerns, while search operations continue in the vicinity. This incident marks a significant development in ongoing efforts to combat terrorism in the region. —*PTI*

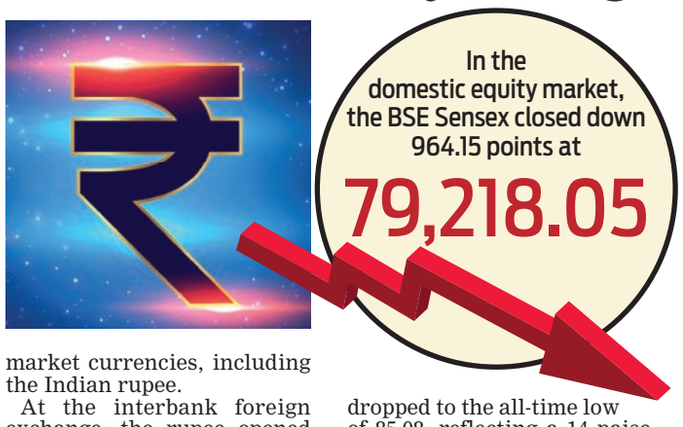
FOR THE 1ST TIME

Rupee hits all-time low of 85 against dollar

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

The Indian rupee has plunged 14 paise to a historic low of 85.08 against the US dollar, driven by a hawkish stance from the US Federal Reserve that ignited a broad rally for the greenback. This marks the first time the rupee has breached the 85-mark.

Forex traders noted that the rupee's decline follows the US Federal Reserve's decision to cut interest rates by 25 basis points to 4.5 per cent, while only projecting two rate cuts in 2025, down from an earlier expectation of four. This adjustment has placed pressure on several emerging market currencies, including the Indian rupee.



At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened weakly and swiftly fell past the crucial 85.00 level. It dropped to the all-time low of 85.08, reflecting a 14 paise decrease from the previous close, as dollar demand surged from importers coupled with foreign fund outflows and a lacklustre performance in domestic equities.

On the previous day, the rupee had already hit a record low of 84.94 against the dollar. Anuj Choudhary, a research analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, remarked that the rupee is expected to continue trading with a negative tendency, influenced by global equities, a strong dollar, and concerns over economic slowdown. Any intervention from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) could offer some support to the rupee. —*PTI*

Farmer leader Dallewal's life hanging by a thread: Docs

CHANDIGARH, 19 DEC

Jagjit Singh Dallewal, a prominent farmer leader from Punjab, has fallen unconscious during his 24th day of a fast-unto-death, with doctors declaring his condition critical. At 70 years old and battling cancer, Dallewal is protesting at the Khanauri border, urging the Centre to provide a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Prices (MSP) on crops.

Doctors with the 5 Rivers Heart Association, monitoring Dallewal's health, reported that his life is "hanging by a thread." They warned of risks including cardiac arrest and multi-organ failure due to a lack of sustenance over the past three weeks. "His blood pressure has dropped and he is experiencing an electrolyte imbalance that could lead to immediate cardiac arrest," stated Dr Abhiraj. —PTI

Dallewal is on a hunger strike at the Khanauri border **PHOTO: X**

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2 men booked for assaulting doctor at Mysuru hospital

MYSURU, 19 DEC

Nazarbad Police have registered a case against two individuals for allegedly assaulting a duty doctor at a private hospital in the city on Thursday. The incident occurred on Wednesday at midnight when the two men, along with four women, arrived at Al Ansar Hospital, located within the police station limits, to seek treatment for a seven-year-old girl who had sustained injuries to her fingers. Dr Rehan Ahamad was in the process of examining and treating the young patient when the two men barged into his chamber. The altercation was captured on hospital's CCTV cameras. —*Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

HC adjourns BSY's POCSO case to 6 January

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

High Court on Thursday adjourned the hearing of a petition filed by former chief minister BS Yediyurappa, who is seeking to quash a case registered against him under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. The next hearing will take place on 6 January, 2025, with the court extending the interim order protecting Yediyurappa from arrest until 7 January. The bench, led by Justice M Nagaprasanna, noted that the arguments in the case remained incomplete. Advocate CV Nagesh, representing Yediyurappa, requested additional time for submissions, while advocate S Balan and the Special Public Prosecutor also sought more time. The court had said quashing POCSO proceedings based solely on witness statements recorded under Sections 161 and 164 of CrPC would not be permissible. —*Salar News*

Dasara exhibition registers footfall of 15 lakh

MYSURU, 19 DEC

Karnataka Exhibition Authority (KEA) Chairman Ayub Khan on Thursday said the Dasara exhibition that began from 3 October has already registered a footfall of 15 lakh. Khan said visitors appreciated the programmes organised since the inauguration of the exhibition, including cultural events, music programmes, Urdu poets' meet and special celebrations on Children Day. The KEA has prepared a plan to conduct more exhibitions and entertainment events throughout the year, Kan said. He said he has also requested organisations and agencies to showcase their products in the Dasara exhibition. Elaborating on the forthcoming events, Khan said that KEA in association with Thibbas Group will conduct a fashion show and competition at Kalingarao auditorium on 28 December. The competition will be organised for different age groups between 2 and 65 years. —*Salar News*

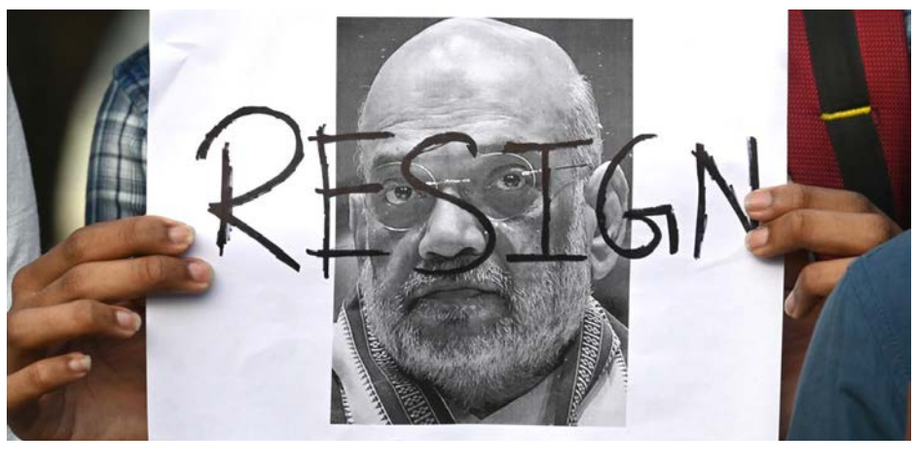
HAL police recover 12 stolen mobiles from suspect

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

The HAL police have successfully recovered 12 stolen mobile phones, valued at approximately Rs 4 lakh, from a suspect linked to a series of thefts at different PG accommodations and construction sites across the city. The investigation began after a building contractor from Friends Layout reported the theft of a mobile phone on the night of 2 December , when a construction worker discovered his device missing while sleeping on-site. During a routine patrol near the Whitefield Bridge, officers apprehended a man displaying suspicious behaviour. Upon inspection, they found several mobile phones hidden in his two-wheeler. —*Salar News*

Chaos erupts in Council over Shah's remark on Ambedkar

Cong, BJP, JD(S) accuse each other of 'insulting' Dalit icon



People protest against Union Minister Amit Shah over his remarks on BR Ambedkar, at Freedom Park in Bengaluru on Thursday ***PHOTOS: MOHAMMED ASAD***

BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

Union Home Minister Amit Shah's alleged remarks against BR Ambedkar created uproar in the Legislative Council on Thursday, leading to repeated disruptions.

Both Congress and BJP and JD(S) MLCs charged each other of "insulting" the architect of the Indian Constitution.

Legislative Council Chairman Basavaraj Horatti, who had initially said that he would allow discussion on the issue, later ruled that it cannot be allowed as Shah, who allegedly made the comments, was not in the House to defend himself.

During a debate on the Constitution in the Rajya Sabha, Shah on Tuesday said, "It has become a fashion to say Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar'. If they had taken God's name so many times, they would have got a place in heaven."

As the House met for the day, Congress MLC B K Hariprasad tried to raise the issue by holding the photo of Ambedkar, to which Chairman Horatti said, "Let's discuss after the question hour".

Harisprasad said the person who wrote the Constitution had been insulted, so it is better if the issue is discussed before the question hour. To this, BJP MLC CT Ravi said, let's discuss who insulted Ambedkar how much when he was alive and when he died. Who defeated him in the election should also be discussed.

Congress shouted "down down BJP", "down down Amit Shah" slogans.

Members of KPCC SC Morcha protest near KPCC office in Bengaluru on Thursday ***PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD***

- Legislative Council Chairman Basavaraj Horatti, who had initially said he would allow discussion on the issue, later ruled that it cannot be allowed as Home Minister Amit Shah, was not in the House to defend himself

Trying to end the stalemate, the Chairman said he would allow discussion after question hour.

After the question hour, when the Chair was taking up Bills for consideration, Congress raised the issue once again and all of them were holding Ambedkar's picture.

The Mysuru Development Authority Bill was passed amid din, without any discussion, as chaotic scenes between opposition and ruling party members continued. —*PTI*

MUDA CASE

HC defers filing of probe report

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

The Karnataka High Court has postponed the filing of the Lokayukta police probe report into the MUDA site allotment case involving Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and his wife, Parvathi BM.

Siddaramaiah faces allegations of irregularities in the allocation of 14 plots by the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) to Parvathi. The court's decision follows a plea requesting the investigation to be transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Senior advocates Abhishek Manu Singhvi and Kapil Sibal, representing Siddaramaiah and the Karnataka government, expressed their intention to contest the transfer plea.

Justice M Nagaprasanna previously issued an interim order to halt proceedings in the trial court, sparking objections from the petitioner's legal team.

The court extended the deadline for the final report to 28 January 2025. —*PTI*

BJP leader denies bribe offer to CM's wife

MYSURU, 19 DEC

Regarding the allegations made by Snehmayi Krishna against the Chief Minister's wife for purportedly offering bribes to his family, BJP leader K Harsha has dismissed these claims as unfounded. Harsha said on Tuesday that he and his associate, Srinidhi, visited Krishna's residence in Bandipalya to discuss matters related to the forthcoming local body elections. He firmly stated that he has no ties to the Chief Minister or his family and alleged that a false complaint was filed against him with the Lokayukta by Snehmayi Krishna.

Harsha expressed his willingness to cooperate with any inquiries. District BJP unit has opted to distance itself from Harsha. —*Salar News*

Who's funding Snehamayi: Cong

MYSURU, 19 DEC

Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee spokesperson M Lakshmana on Thursday criticised MUDA scam case petitioner and RTI activist Snehamayi Krishna for raising allegations that people close to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's wife BM Parvathi offered him bribe to withdraw his complaint to the Lokayukta. The CM's family will not stoop to such low levels, he said.

The Congress leader also asked Krishna to disclose who is funding his legal battle in alleged MUDA Scam, his Delhi visits and his five-star hotel stays in Bengaluru and other places.

"Snehamayi Krishna is just a side actor. Producers and directors of MUDA scam are all different persons. Congress has all such details," he said. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

Metro may be extended to Hoskote, Nelamangala & Bidadi: Shivakumar

BELAGAVI, 19 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar has dropped hints that the Karnataka government is likely to extend the Bengaluru Metro Rail up to Hoskote in the east, Nelamangala town in the west and Bidadi in the south west of Bengaluru City.

Replying to a question raised by Sharath Bache Gowda in the Karnataka Assembly on Wednesday about severe traffic congestion on the Old Madras Road from KR Puram to Hoskote, the deputy CM said, "I am aware of the traffic woes. I am planning for it and getting a detailed survey done. Our government and Namma Metro will sympathetically consider the MLA's plea," he said.

"We are seeking a report on extending Metro Rail up to Hoskote, Nelamangala and Bidadi," Shivakumar said. —*PTI*

Lokayukta raids BESCOM & BWSSB over corruption claims

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

In a significant crackdown on suspected corruption and inefficiency, Karnataka Lokayukta officials conducted simultaneous raids at 45 locations across Bengaluru on Thursday, primarily focusing on the offices of BESCOM (Bengaluru Electricity Supply Company) and BWSSB (Bengaluru Water Supply and Sewerage Board).

The raids were initiated following a spike in public complaints, resulting in the Lokayukta registering 83 suo motu cases against BESCOM and 63 against BWSSB. Allegations included corruption, nepotism, delays in service delivery, and hindrances

to public applications.

A major oversight uncovered during the operation involved BESCOM's Executive Engineer, GM Amarnath Reddy, who failed to maintain a mandatory register of officials essential for departmental accountability. Deputy Lokayukta Panindra, leading the operation, reprimanded Reddy on-site, underscoring the necessity of transparency and proper documentation in government organisations.

The raids also highlighted various administrative lapses, including missing attendance records and lack of logs for staff entry and exit timings. In one instance, an employee was found in possession of Rs 12,000 without a satisfactory explanation.

Alongside the raids, two government officials were caught red-handed accepting bribes. A revenue inspector in Mulki taluk was apprehended while accepting a bribe of Rs 4 lakh for updating legal heirs' names in the RTC. Additionally, a land surveyor in Bidar was arrested while demanding Rs 1.5 lakh for surveying land.

Deputy Lokayukta Panindra assured the public of a thorough inquiry. —*Salar News*

4-hour traffic jam as driver abandons truck

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

Electronic City traffic police have filed a case against a truck driver who allegedly caused a massive traffic congestion by abandoning his vehicle on Hosur Road near the NICE Road entry on Wednesday. The incident led to severe traffic jams lasting nearly four hours.

Around 4:30 pm, the truck, with registration number NL01 AE 6646, was parked across the highway, blocking access to the NICE Road.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (Traffic) Shivaprakash Devaraju stated that the disruption began after a traffic officer stopped the truck near Konappana Agrahara for violating several traffic regulations.

Heavy Goods Vehicles are restricted from entering the city during peak hours, and the driver was found guilty of parking on a main road and driving through a no-entry zone. —*Salar News*

Farmer dies by suicide in Bidar

LATUR, 19 DEC

A farmer from Maharashtra's Latur district has allegedly taken his own life in neighbouring Karnataka's Bidar district on Thursday, as reported by family members.

Someshwar Khandu Mugale, 33, a resident of Ismalwadi in Deoni tehsil, is believed to have been driven to despair by persistent crop failures and accumulating debts. He was found hanged in Bhantbra, located in Bhalki in Bidar district. —*PTI*

CBSE finds 'dummy' students in City

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Central Board of Secondary schools conducted a series of surprise inspections at schools in Bengaluru to check enrolment of 'dummy' students, officials said on Thursday.

The checks were also carried out in 29 schools in other cities such as Delhi, , Varanasi, Bihar, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh

According to CBSE Secretary Himanshu Gupta, a total of 29 teams, comprising a CBSE officer and a

PHOTO: X

principal from an affiliated school, conducted the inspections. "Majority of the inspected schools were found to have violated the Board's Affiliation Bye-Laws by enrolling students beyond their actual attendance records. Additionally, schools were found to be flouting infrastructural norms of the board," Gupta said.

"CBSE has taken these violations seriously and is in the process of issuing show-cause notices to the schools found in breach of regulations. The Board is also considering legal action against the defaulting institutions," he added.

The inspections were conducted on Wednesday and Thursday. —*PTI*

HOUSE RENTAL SCAM

Conman dupes 12 of Rs 58L via NoBroker

BENGALURU, 19 DEC

In a shocking case of rental fraud, 12 house-hunters in the city have alleged losing a combined total of Rs 58 lakh to a scammer posing as a property owner. The fraudulent activities reportedly occurred through the popular online brokerage platform, NoBroker, raising serious concerns over the safety of online property transactions.

Victims from various states claimed that the accused, identified as Girish, posted a fake property listing for a house in Cholanagar, within the Hebbal police station limits.

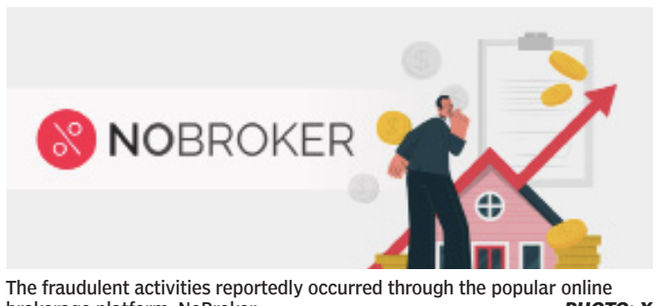
Enticed by an attractive deal, multiple prospective tenants contacted him. Girish allegedly demanded advance payments ranging from Rs 2 lakh to Rs 6 lakh per individual, promising to lease the property at a competitive rate. It wasn't until they collectively transferred over Rs 58 lakh that they realised they had been conned.

The victims further asserted that Girish employed calculated tactics to mislead them. He allegedly cited renovation work and tenant disputes as excuses for delays in finalising lease agreements. When pressed for refunds, he provided cheques that later bounced due to mismatched signatures or incorrect account holder names.

To manipulate his victims further, Girish reportedly fabricated personal tragedies, such as the death of his father, to evoke sympathy and gain extra time.

A 30-year-old Mumbai-based techie, who recently landed a high-paying job in Bengaluru, revealed he lost Rs 4.8 lakh after responding to Girish's listing on the NoBroker app. "We learned that the accused had shown the same house to each victim and collected hefty advance payments," the techie told Salar News on Thursday.

Preliminary police investigations suggest the scam may involve Girish's relatives, prompting victims to escalate their complaints to the Central Crime Branch after initial frustrations with the local police. No statements have yet been issued by authorities or NoBroker regarding the incident. —*Salar News*



The fraudulent activities reportedly occurred through the popular online brokerage platform, NoBroker ***PHOTO: X***

Mandya prepares for 87th Kannada Sahitya meet

MANDYA, 19 DEC

Mandya city is poised to host the 87th All-India Kannada Sahitya Sammelana for the third time in three decades, taking place from Friday to Sunday. Preparations are complete with the venue set up over a sprawling 70 acres, accompanied by a separate 60-acre parking area located near Srinivasapura village on the Mandya-Mysuru expressway. Kannada enthusiasts have begun flocking to the Sugar Town of Karnataka.

On Thursday, Sammelana president Go Ru Channabasappa was formally welcomed at the event's entrance. Infographics detailing highlights of the three-day programme, accommodation and transport facilities, along with significant debates and events, have been prepared for attendees.

Approximately 2,500 workers, including 750 chefs from Navaneeth Caterers in Mysuru, have been working tirelessly to prepare local delicacies such as one lakh holige sweets, Badusha, Mysuru Pak, Laddus, and other offerings for participants. However, the district administration's ban on non-vegetarian meals has sparked controversy, leading Kannada activists and writers, led by Rajendraprasad, to organise a collection of chicken, sheep, and goats from local villages to serve non-veg food at the venue.

District administration has established 450 book stalls, 350 commercial stalls, and 55 departmental stalls to showcase achievements. Additionally, 100 food counters will cater to attendees, with 40 set aside for elected representatives, ensuring safety regulations are met. —*Salar News*

95% of villages declared ODF Plus till now: Govt

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Ministry of Jal Shakti has announced that approximately 95 per cent of villages in India have achieved the status of "Open Defecation Free Plus" (ODF Plus). This initiative, which extends beyond toilet construction, aims to enhance overall sanitation and manage solid and liquid waste effectively. Leading the charge, Uttar Pradesh has reported 93,947 villages attaining ODF Plus status, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 50,580 and Maharashtra with 37,327 villages. Smaller states and Union Territories, including Ladakh and Lakshadweep, have successfully declared all their villages as ODF Plus. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Ram Shinde is Maharashtra Council Chair

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

Ram Shinde, a legislator from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been elected unopposed as the new chairperson of the Maharashtra Legislative Council. The position had been vacant since 7 July, 2022, following the end of NCP leader Ramraje Naik-Nimbalkar's term. With Shinde's election, the BJP now holds the presiding officer posts in both houses of the state legislature, part of the Mahayuti coalition including the NCP and Shiv Sena. Last week, BJP MLA Rahul Narwekar was similarly elected as Speaker of the assembly. Shinde's nomination was proposed by MLCs Shrikant Bhartiya, Uma Khapre, and Shivajirao Garje, with support from fellow members. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said Shinde, highlighting his grassroots leadership and oratory skills.*—PTI*

UP man arrested for threatening to kill Yogi

BAREILLY, 19 DEC

A man has been arrested for allegedly threatening to kill Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and police officials. According to police, Anil dialled 112, an emergency service number, and claimed that he would shoot the chief minister on 26 January. He also threatened the station in-charge of Izzatnagar police station and other officers, they said. "After receiving the threat on Tuesday night, police launched a search operation, but the accused's phone was switched off. Following extensive efforts overnight, Anil was located and arrested on Wednesday," said SHO of Izzatnagar Police Station Dhananjay Pandey. He will be produced before a court here later on Thursday, the police officer said *—PTI*

UP Cong Chief faces wrath at worker's funeral

GORAKHPUR, 19 DEC

The funeral of a 28-year-old Congress worker turned chaotic in his native village in Gorakhpur on Thursday after the party's Uttar Pradesh chief Ajay Rai arrived to pay his respects, sparking angry reactions from locals who accused him of exploiting the tragedy for political gain. Prabhat Pandey died during the party's protest near the Uttar Pradesh Assembly in Lucknow on Wednesday, with Rai claiming that he died due to "police brutality". However, the police said he was brought dead to the hospital from Congress office. His body was brought home for last rites on Thursday. The situation became heated when Rai arrived to pay his respects, prompting locals to shout slogans such as "Ajay Rai go back," "Murderer party go back," and "Rahul Gandhi Murdabad, Priyanka Gandhi Murdabad." *—PTI*

BJP, Congress trade barbs over 'pushing' claims

Cong files plaint against unruly conduct of BJP against RaGa

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

INDIA Bloc leaders and NDA members protest at Parliament complex, in New Delhi, on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

Congress on Thursday denied BJP's charges that its leader Rahul Gandhi pushed and injured two of the ruling party's MP' with party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra saying that her brother and others were protesting peacefully but were prevented from entering Parliament by BJP MPs carrying "sticks".

Congress filed a complaint against BJP in Parliament House police station. Both sides also complained to the respective Chairs in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha against each other.

National Conference leader Omar Abdullah said he knew Rahul and he would not push anyone.

Hitting out at Gandhi, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said appropriate action would be taken in the matter. "Parliament is not a place to show physical strength. It is not a wrestling ring," he said.

Congress MPs met Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and submitted a complaint against the alleged unruly conduct of BJP MPs against Rahul Gandhi and attempts to stop him from entering Parliament House.

Phangnon Konyak, a woman BJP MP from Nagaland, said in the Rajya Sabha that Gandhi came in "very close proximity of me" during a "peaceful" protest and shouted at her. He made her uncomfortable, she said, accusing him of conduct unbecoming of his position as the Leader of Opposition.

Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankar said that he has received a communication from Konyak on the incident and she also met him in his chamber. *—PTI*

Kharge submits privilege motion against Shah

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Congress president and Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge on Thursday submitted a privilege notice against Home Minister Amit Shah for his remarks against BR Ambedkar. In his notice submitted to the RS Chairman, Kharge alleged that the remarks made by Shah were an insult to the architect of the Constitution and amounted to breach of privilege and contempt of the House.

Congress accused BJP of diverting attention from the issue of Home Minister Amit Shah's "insult" to BR Ambedkar, and demanded that Shah must resign and apologise for his remarks.

BSP chief Mayawati said Union Home Minister Amit Shah should take back his recent remark on B R Ambedkar, and alleged that it has harmed the Dalit icon's dignity and offended his followers.

AAP national convenor Arvind Kejriwal said that "Ambedkar is no less than the god of modern India".

"You have to choose between Baba Saheb and the BJP. Jo Baba Saheb se kare pyaar, vo BJP ko kare inkaar (those who love Baba Saheb should reject the BJP)," said Kejriwal during his visit to Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir at Mandir Marg here.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said she was shocked at Shah's recent remarks and the way he was being "belittled".

Banerjee was speaking at the 'Kolkata Christmas Festival' inauguration at Allen Park in the Park Street area and later at a get-together in St Xavier's College. "I am shocked at the comments made about Babasaheb Ambedkar... I feel bad seeing Babasaheb belittled," she said.

She had termed the remarks derogatory, claiming that those were an insult to the millions of people who look up to Ambedkar for guidance and inspiration.

Meanwhile, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) led by Ambedkar's grandson, Prakash Ambedkar held a protest in Maharashtra's Latur city . Citing an email, the Congress on Thursday claimed that the BJP government has asked social media platform 'X' to remove the speech of Home Minister Amit Shah made in the Rajya Sabha, which it said "insulted" Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan Thursday alleging it has always hated BR Ambedkar and had even included a cartoon in an NCERT textbook showing Jawaharlal Nehru "whipping" Ambedkar.

He claimed that the "crocodile tears" of the Congress over Ambedkar are just pretence. *—PTI*

FIR against KTR over Formula-E race corruption case

HYDERABAD, 19 DEC

KT Rama Rao **PHOTO: PTI**

The Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) on Thursday registered an FIR against BRS working president and MLA KT Rama Rao over alleged irregularities in the conduct of Formula-E race in Hyderabad during the previous regime, official sources said.

Telangana Governor Jishnu Dev Varma had recently granted permission to register a case against Rama Rao, over the issue.

The case was registered under relevant sections of the Prevention of Corruption Act against Rama Rao and two officials, the sources told PTI.

The Telangana government had written to the governor in November, seeking permission to register an FIR against Rama Rao over the alleged irregularities.

The Municipal Administration department had reportedly urged the ACB to investigate the matter.

Earlier this year, the government had sought an explanation from a senior bureaucrat over entering into the agreement concerning the Formula-E race allegedly without the approval of the competent authority and also making a payment of Rs 55 crore.

Rao was instrumental in hosting the race last year in Hyderabad.

Though the race was supposed to be held in February this year as well, it was cancelled after the Congress government assumed office in December 2023.

Charging that the Congress government has been making baseless allegations against Rama Rao on the issue for several months now, BRS said the previous government had entered into an agreement with the organisers of Formula-E race to benefit Telangana. *—PTI*

Omar meets HM to discuss restoration of J&K statehood

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Thursday met with Union Home Minister Amit Shah here to discuss a range of key issues, including the early restoration of statehood, officials said.

The Chief Minister will also seek clarity on the Transaction of Business Rules (TBR) to get a clear sense of the powers of the elected government over various departments.

On Wednesday, Abdullah said there were a lot of issues, including restoration of statehood, on which he needs to talk to the Union home minister. He met Shah on 23 October during his first visit to New Delhi after assuming office on 16 October. *—PTI*

Congress MP Mallikarjun Kharge with MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and others protest, demanding the resignation of HM Amit Shah **PHOTO: PTI**

Dharma Sansad cancelled by police: Narasinghanand

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Controversial Dasna priest Yati Narasinghanand on Thursday said the three-day World Dharma Sansad convened by him here was cancelled after police intervention.

Sripanchdashnam Juna Akhara cancelled the World Dharma Sansad scheduled to start here on Thursday after the police had the tents uprooted at the venue and chased away the cooks who had gathered for the event, Narasinghanand told reporters.

The police also pasted a notice at the venue prohibiting any such assembly, he said. Terming it "goondaism" being done in the Supreme Court's name, he said that he would undertake a padyatra to the apex court on Saturday against it.

"If what I have said about Islam or the Koran is wrong, then I am ready to bear whatever punishment the Supreme Court gives me. But I will not let anything wrong happen even if the Supreme Court puts me in jail for life," said Narasinghanand.

The congregation was to be held at the Akhara headquarters here in protest against the alleged atrocities against the Hindus in Bangladesh. *—PTI*

Priest Yati Narasinghanand said that he would undertake a padyatra to the apex court against prohibitory order to hold Sansad **PHOTO: PTI**

Parl panel urged to use Waqf land for education

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The Waqf (Amendment) Bill on Thursday received support from a group of Muslims, including academicians and clerics, at the meeting of a parliamentary committee scrutinising the draft law, and some of them suggested that Waqf properties should be also used to open educational and health facilities.

Syed Abubakar Naqvi, ex-chairman of the Waqf Board, Rajasthan, Mahrukh Mirza, former vice chancellor of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti Language University, Lucknow, and Maulana Raza Husain of Majlis-e-ulema-e-Hind, were among those who appeared before the joint parliamentary committee headed by BJP MP Jagdambika Pal.

Naqvi, sources said, described the bill as progressive which will boost the country's development as he added that the existing law was full of shortcomings. The proposed law has good provisions for poor children and widows, he added.

A few opposition MPs, sources said, questioned the general statement made by some of those who appeared before the panel in support of the bill, without offering specific comments on its different clauses.

Husain said the bill's move to curb corruption is a good step. If the new law boosts the progress of the community and country, then it is welcome, he said. However, he asserted that the government should ensure that Waqf properties should be used for the purpose they are meant for.

He said he also had some objections to the new bill.

Mirza said Waqf land should also be used for opening educational institutions and hospitals across the country. He said Muslims should be given 50 per cent of the seats, while Dalit and backward communities should get the rest, sources said

Pal later told reporters the stakeholders who spoke to the committee on Thursday will give a detailed response later, responding to questions raised by many MPs. *—PTI*

PM SPEAKS TO KING CHARLES, REAFFIRMS INDIA-UK TIES

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday spoke to UK's King Charles and reaffirmed India's commitment to strengthening the comprehensive strategic partnership.

During their discussion, they reflected on the historic relationship and emphasized their shared goal of fostering deeper collaboration in various areas.

They reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the two nations which has been a cornerstone of bilateral relations, according to an official statement.

The conversation also touched upon the Commonwealth of Nations, with both leaders exchanging views on the outcomes of the recently concluded Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Samoa.

Both countries are key members of the Commonwealth and the dialogue highlighted their dedication to advancing the organization's goals. *—PTI*

MONITORING B'DESH SITUATION, SAYS INDIA

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

India has expressed deep concern regarding rising incidents of violence against Hindus and other minority communities in Bangladesh, reinforcing that the primary responsibility for their safety lies with the interim government in Dhaka. Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh made these remarks in the Rajya Sabha, following a visit by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to Bangladesh, where he conveyed India's apprehensions to the country's leadership.

Singh stated that India's concerns have been communicated to Bangladeshi authorities on numerous occasions, stressing that the situation is being closely monitored. Reports indicate that the Bangladeshi government has arrested 70 individuals and filed 88 cases related to minority violence. He highlighted multiple instances of attacks against Hindus and their places of worship, particularly during the recent Durga Puja festival. "We have expressed serious concerns about attacks on temples and puja mandaps, including incidents in Tantibazar, Dhaka, and at the Jeshoreshwari Kali temple in Satkhira," Singh noted.

In response to these incidents, the Bangladeshi government has reportedly implemented measures to enhance security during the celebrations. *—PTI*

RAISES CAUTION

States' freebies hinder dvpt: RBI

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

PHOTO: PIXABAY

A recent report from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has raised alarms about state-level financial aid programmes, such as farm loan waivers, free electricity, and public transport, suggesting that these initiatives could undermine states' capacity to finance essential social and economic infrastructure.

The report titled 'State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2024-25' acknowledged that state governments have successfully maintained their gross fiscal deficit within 3 per cent of GDP for the past three years (2021-22 to 2023-24) while keeping the revenue deficit at just 0.2 per cent of GDP for 2022-23 and 2023-24. This fiscal discipline has enabled states to increase capital spending and enhance the quality of their expenditures. The document noted a concerning uptick in expenditure on subsidies, fuelled by initiatives such as loan waivers and cash transfers to various groups, including farmers, youth, and women. The RBI urged states to rationalise subsidy expenditures to avoid detracting from more productive investment areas.

It highlighted that states' outstanding liabilities, while declining from 31 per cent of GDP in March 2021 to 28.5 per cent in March 2024, still surpass pre-pandemic levels of 25.3 per cent. The financial health of state-sponsored electricity distribution companies also remains a significant burden, with outstanding debts having risen dramatically in recent years. *—PTI*

Sambhal MP, father booked for stealing power

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

PHOTO: PTI

Ziaur Rehman Barq, the Samajwadi Party MP for Sambhal, has been booked by Uttar Pradesh Police for allegedly stealing electricity at his residence in Deepa Sarai. The case was registered under Section 135 of the Electricity Act, 2003, concerning theft or unauthorised use of electricity.

His father, Mamlukur Rehman Barq, has also been implicated for threatening government officials. According to FIR, power department official, a thorough examination of the electricity meter confirmed illegal electricity usage, with evidence suggesting the meter had been bypassed. Disturbingly, the inspection took place amidst heavy security after recent unrest in the region, wherein four locals were killed during violence related to a court-mandated survey of the Mughal-era Shahi Jama Masjid on 24 November. *—PTI*

HC relief for 3 boys expelled over non-veg in school

PRAYAGRAJ, 19 DEC

The Allahabad High Court has come to the aid of three minor children, who were expelled from a school for allegedly bringing non-vegetarian food in their tiffin, and asked the district magistrate to ensure they are admitted to another school within two weeks. Hearing a writ petition filed by one Sabra and three others from Amroha, a bench comprising Justices Siddharth and SC Sharma directed the district magistrate of Amroha to get them admitted in a school affiliated to the CBSE within a period of two weeks and file an affidavit of compliance before this court. In its order on 17 December, the court directed that the court will be heard afresh on 6 January, 2025. —*PTI*

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

Veteran Malayalam actor Meena Ganesh dies at 81

PALAKKAD, 19 DEC

Veteran Malayalam film and serial actress Meena Ganesh died on Thursday at a private hospital in Shornur in Palakkad district, where she was undergoing treatment for the past five days following a stroke, Film Employees Federation of Kerala (FEFKA) said. FEFKA general secretary B Unnikrishnan, in a statement, said that Meena Ganesh, 81, acted in more than 200 films, 25 television serials and in her long acting career. She made her debut in 1976 in PA Backer's film 'Manimuzhakkam' and her roles in movies like 'Nandanam', 'Meeshamadhavan' and 'Karumadikuttan' attracted audience attention, the FEFKA Directors Union said in a Facebook post. She is the wife of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award winner and famous playwright and director NN Ganesh. —*PTI*

Punjab sees 2nd blast in a week, 3rd in a month

CHANDIGARH, 19 DEC

An alleged blast took place on Wednesday night outside the Bakshiwal police chowki in Gurdaspur district, Punjab police said on Thursday. The police launched a probe on Thursday following reports that a "blast" took place. This is the second incident of blast in Punjab this week and the third this month. The police said a team of forensic experts reached the Bakshiwal police chowki to investigate the Wednesday incident. Kalanaur Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Gurwinder Singh said, "We have launched an investigation." Another blast that occurred at Islamabad police station in Punjab's Amritsar on Tuesday. However, no one was injured. —*PTI*

J&K parties condemn removal of chapter on saint

SRINAGAR, 19 DEC

The CPI(M) and People's Conference on Thursday criticised the Jammu and Kashmir Board of School Education (BOSE) for removing the chapter on the life of revered saint Sheikh Noor-ud-din Noorani from the 9th-grade textbook, with former Minister Sajad Gani Lone calling it "cultural terrorism." However, ruling National Conference spokesperson Tanvir Sadiq said the chapter on the saint will not be removed from the textbooks and the state education minister had asked the officials concerned to rectify the issue. "The chapter on Sheikh-ul-Alam will not be removed from textbooks. Taking to X, CPI MLA MY Tarigami had urged CM Omar Abdullah to intervene to ensure that the chapter is reinstated thereby preserving and honouring our rich cultural and Sufi heritage," —*PTI*

Centre restricts foreigners in Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram

This comes amid concerns of influx from neighbouring nations

IMPHAL, 19 DEC

The Union Ministry of Home Affairs has reimposed the Protected Area Permit (PAP) in three north-eastern states – Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram – in view of security concerns arising out of influx from neighbouring countries, a statement issued by the Manipur government has said.

The statement issued late on Wednesday night said, "With this reimposition, the movement of foreigners visiting Manipur will be closely monitored, and they are required to obtain the necessary Protected Area Permit in accordance with the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958."

The Manipur government has taken serious note of a warning purportedly issued by an organisation named Kuki Zo Council against Chief Minister N Biren Singh travelling by road through Kangpokpi district to Senapati district to attend a cultural programme.

"Upon investigation, it has been found that no such organisation (Kuki Zo Council) exists in Manipur. The origin and authenticity of this group are highly questionable," the statement said.

It also said that police are investigating this matter, and an FIR will be lodged to ascertain the true nature and intent behind such misleading activities.

The government also advised the people "to exercise caution and not to pay heed to statements or claims from organisations of dubious origins, which have been surfacing recently with the apparent intention of creating confusion and unrest".

It said that the state government is committed to maintaining peace and harmony in the state and advised citizens to remain vigilant and trust only credible sources of information.

Meanwhile, the Centre is actively engaging with states that have yet to achieve 100 per cent tap water connection coverage for rural households, Jal Shakti Minister CR Paatil said on Thursday. Speaking at a press conference, the minister acknowledged that the 2024 deadline for ensuring tap water access in rural India has passed. —*PTI*

The government advised people to exercise caution and not to pay heed to statements or claims from organisations of dubious origins **PHOTO: PTI**

'Paid twice my debt, will challenge ED'

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

PHOTO: PTI

Fugitive businessman Vijay Mallya has announced his intention to challenge claims made by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and various banks, which he states have recovered more than double the debt he owed. His comments follow Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's recent statement in Parliament, declaring that over Rs 14,130 crore has been recovered from Mallya's attached assets.

In a series of posts on the social media platform X, Mallya outlined that the Debt Recovery Tribunal had determined the debt from his Kingfisher Airlines (KFA) at Rs 6,203 crore, which includes Rs 1,200 crore in interest. He argued that the ED and the banks must provide a legal justification for recovering more than double that amount, stating, "I am entitled to relief which I will pursue."

Sitharaman, while addressing a debate in the Lok Sabha regarding the first batch of Supplementary Demands for Grants, noted that properties worth Rs 14,131.6 crore belonging to Mallya had been restored to public sector banks. Mallya, who fled to the UK in March 2016, is wanted in India for allegedly defaulting on loans amounting to Rs 9,000 crore given to KFA by various banks.

Mallya insisted that his liabilities as a guarantor for KFA loans were legally verifiable, yet claimed that over Rs 8,000 crore has been recovered from him beyond the judgement debt.

He challenged his critics to question what he termed "blatant injustice" and called for a review of the criminal charges against him by the Central Bureau of Investigation, maintaining his innocence. Indian government is actively pursuing Mallya's extradition from the UK. —*PTI*

RG Kar victim's parents expressed their lack of confidence in the current investigation **PHOTO: ANI**

RG Kar case: Parents seek probe, moves HC

KOLKATA, 19 DEC

The parents of a doctor who was tragically raped and murdered at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital have petitioned the Calcutta High Court for a new investigation into the crime. They expressed their lack of confidence in the current investigation, which has sparked widespread protests, and requested the court to instruct a fresh inquiry into their daughter's case.

Justice Tirthankar Ghosh has directed the family's lawyer to include the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as a party in the petition, with proceedings set to resume on Monday.

The body of the on-duty postgraduate trainee doctor was discovered in a seminar room of the hospital on 9 August. In a recent development, the Sealdah court granted bail on 13 December to Sandip Ghosh, the former principal of RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, and Abhijit Mondal, the officer-in-charge of the Tala police station. Their bail was granted due to the CBI's failure to submit charge sheets within the 90-day statutory period. Ghosh faced allegations of evidence tampering, while Mondal was accused of delaying the filing of a First Information Report (FIR).

The CBI has filed a charge sheet against the prime accused, Sanjay Roy, who allegedly committed the crime while the victim was resting in the seminar room during a break.

The case continues to draw significant public attention and outrage. —*PTI*

Navy speedboat driver's stunt ended in mid-sea tragedy, says survivor

A ferry capsized off Mumbai coast when a Navy craft crashed into it, on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

The driver of the Navy speedboat that collided with a ferry packed with passengers on way to a tourist site off the Mumbai coast was in a "playful mood" and was "showing off", said a survivor who lost his aunt in the crash.

The survivor, Gautam Gupta, on Thursday recounted the moments leading up to the horrific speedboat-ferry collision on Wednesday afternoon that claimed the lives of 14 individuals, including Navy personnel.

The body of a 43-year-old man identified Hansraj Bhati who was among the two missing passengers after a Navy craft rammed into their ferry off the Mumbai coast, was found on Thursday, police said. Of the 113 people on board both the vessels.

The ferry was on its way to Elephanta Island, which has a collection of ancient caves, from the Gateway of India in south Mumbai when it sank off the city coast after the collision.

Gupta, said many passengers, including himself, were busy recording videos of the speedboat as the driver zigzagged through the waters.

"The driver turned the speedboat and headed directly towards us. He must have thought he could pass by our ferry, but his stunt ended in tragedy,"Gupta said. —*PTI*

'Never saw such horrific incident'

Mumbai, 19 Dec

The drivers of some boats who rushed to help the ferry tragedy victims off the Mumbai coast were aghast to see chaos at the site with people screaming for help and said they never witnessed such a horrific incident in their lives. Arif Bamane, a driver of the Mumbai Port Trust (MBPT) pilot boat Poorva, said, "When we reached there, the situation was tragic and completely chaotic. People were screaming for help, and some were crying." He recalled a small girl lying motionless as water had entered her lungs. —*PTI*

Hanuman chalisa chanted at reopened Aligarh temple

ALIGARH, 19 DEC

Right-wing organisations and some local BJP leaders held a 'shuddhikaran' (purification) ceremony and chanted Hanuman chalisa at a long-abandoned Shiva temple in a Muslim-majority locality here after it was "reopened" by members of these groups.

The purification ceremony, organised by groups like Bajrang Dal and All India Karni Sena, took place on Wednesday night, amid tight security measures.

Gyanendra Singh Chauhan, state secretary of All India Karni Sena, said the temple was spotted during a drive by his organisation to find abandoned places of worship.

The purification ceremony, organised by groups like Bajrang Dal and All India Karni Sena, took place amid tight security measures **PHOTO: PTI**

Former Aligarh Mayor, BJP's Shakuntala Bharti, voiced concerns over the state of the temple.

"I have written to the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister. We want a proper survey to remove encroachments and restore regular puja."

Fateh Mohammad, a resident of the locality recounted the temple's history. "The temple was built about 50 years ago on land adjoining a house. For years, people performed puja until about five years ago when the temple was abandoned," he said. He added that the Muslim residents of the area welcome the revival of puja and have pledged to cooperate with the temple's management. —*PTI*

DELHI TO GET SIGNAGES IN HINDI, ENGLISH, PUNJABI AND URDU

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Delhi is set to enhance its road signages and directional boards, by incorporating information in Hindi, English, Punjabi, and Urdu.

Bureaucrats in the Delhi government will also be required to display their names in the four languages on boards outside their offices. This move is in accordance with "The Delhi Official Languages Act, 2000," which recognises Hindi as the primary official language, with Urdu and Punjabi being the secondary official languages. Presently, most signage in the city features only Hindi and English.

In a communication dated 4 November, the Department of Arts, Culture and Language directed all departments, civic bodies, and autonomous authorities to comply with the Act, following instructions from Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena.

Meanwhile, this mandate applies across metro stations, hospitals, public parks, and other public spaces. —*PTI*

FARMERS' PROTEST

SC tells Punjab to check Dallewal's health

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Irom Sharmila also continued with her protest under medical supervision, the Supreme Court on Thursday said while asking the Punjab government to convince 70-year-old farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who is on an indefinite fast, to undergo health examination.

The top court pulled up the Punjab government for not conducting medical tests on Dallewal, who is on an indefinite fast at Punjab-Haryana Khanauri border.

A bench of Justices Surya Kant and Ujjal Bhuyan said while no one was trying to uproot the farmers' protest, it only wanted to ensure Dallewal's safety, calling him a "mass leader".

The court had noted Punjab government doctors' statement on Dallewal's health saying he was alright even without conducting basic medical tests.

"A over 70-year-old person on hunger strike for past 21 days and suffering from various ailments health is alright. How it can be? Have you conducted his blood tests, ECG test and required investigation?" asked the bench.

Justice Surya Kant went on, "Court will talk to him (Jagjit Singh Dallewal) once we satisfy ourselves that he is safe."

Punjab farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal (second from right) on his fast-unto-death near the Khanauri Border in Sangrur district **PHOTO: X**

The farmer leader had reportedly conveyed through Punjab officials that he personally wanted to address the court.

The top court asked Punjab advocate general Gurminder Singh to persuade Dallewal to take medical treatment for a week at least saying others could continue with the protest.

Singh sought a day's time to convince Dallewal and convey the court's sentiments for ensuring his well-being.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Thursday urged the Centre to give up its "stubbornness" and engage in talks with the farmers who are protesting to press for their demands, including a legal guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops. —*PTI*

Andhra HC backs lesbian pair's right to live together

AMARAVATI, 19 DEC

The Andhra Pradesh High Court has affirmed the right of a lesbian couple to live together, reinforcing their freedom to choose their partners. Justices R Raghunandan Rao and K Maheswara Rao heard a habeas corpus petition involving Kavitha (name changed), who claimed her partner Lalitha (name changed) was being unlawfully detained by her father in Narsipatnam.

The court intervened after police located Lalitha at her father's residence following a missing persons complaint filed by Kavitha. She also filed a complaint against her parents for harassment. After returning to Vijayawada, Lalitha was forcibly taken away again by her father, prompting Kavitha to seek legal redress. Jada Kumar,

representing Kavitha, highlighted earlier Supreme Court rulings that support the couple's right to cohabit, arguing that Lalitha had made her wishes clear. The court ordered Lalitha's parents not to interfere noting that she is capable of making her decisions. The courtalso directed that no criminal charges be filed against them —*PTI*

AMID THE RUBBLES

A boy stands amidst the debris in the Kaweni slum on the outskirts of Mamoudzou, on the French Indian Ocean island of Mayotte, on Thursday, following Cyclone Chido. At least 31 people have been confirmed dead, with over 1,700 injured in the most powerful storm to strike Mayotte in nearly a century. Approximately 1,00,000 residents have been displaced, many seeking shelter in makeshift accommodation
PHOTO: PTI

ASSAD'S FALL FUELS HOPE FOR DIVIDED FAMILIES

The four sisters gathered by the side of the road, craning their necks to peer far beyond the razor wire-reinforced fence snaking across the mountain. One took off her jacket and waved it slowly above her head.

In the distance, a tiny white speck waved frantically from the hillside.

"We can see you!" Soha Safadi exclaimed excitedly on her cellphone. She paused briefly to wipe away tears that had begun to flow. "Can you see us too?"

The tiny speck on the hill was Soha's sister, Sawsan. Separated by war and occupation, they hadn't seen each other in person for 22 years.

The six Safadi sisters belong to the Druze community, one of the Middle East's most insular religious minorities. Its population is spread across Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Golan Heights, a rocky plateau that Israel seized from Syria in 1967 and annexed in 1981.

The US is the only country to recognise Israel's control; the rest of the world considers the Golan Heights occupied Syrian territory.

Israel's seizure of the Golan Heights split families apart.

Five of the six Safadi sisters and their parents live in Majdal Shams, a Druze town next to the buffer zone created between the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights and Syria. But the sixth, 49-year-old Sawsan, married a man from Jaramana, a town on the outskirts of the Syrian capital, Damascus, 27 years ago and has lived in Syria ever since. They have land in the buffer zone, where they grow olives and apples and also maintain a small house.

With very few visits allowed to relatives over the years, a nearby hill was dubbed "Shouting Hill," where families would gather on either side of the fence and use loudspeakers to speak to each other.

The practice declined as the internet made video calls widely accessible, while the Syrian war that began in 2011 made it difficult for those on the Syrian side to reach the buffer zone.

The US is the only country to recognise Israel's control; the rest of the world considers the Golan Heights occupied Syrian territory
PHOTO: PTI

But since the Dec. 8 fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, families like the Safadis, are starting to revive the practice. They cling to hope, however faint, that regime change will herald a loosening of restrictions between the Israeli-controlled area and Syria that have kept them from their loved ones for so long.

"It was something a bit different. You see her in person. It feels like you could be there in two minutes by car," Soha Safadi, 51, said Wednesday after seeing the speck that was her sister on the hill. "This is much better, much better."

Since Assad's fall, the sisters have been coming to the fence every day to see Sawsan. They make arrangements by phone for a specific time, and then make a video call while also trying to catch a glimpse of each other across the hill.

"She was very tiny, but I could see her," Soha Safadi said. "There were a lot of mixed feelings — sadness, joy and hope. And God willing, God willing, soon, soon, we will see her" in person.

After Assad fell, the Israeli military pushed through the buffer zone and into Syria proper.

It has captured Mount Hermon, Syria's tallest mountain, known as Jabal al Sheikh in Arabic, on the slopes of which lies Majdal Shams. The buffer zone is now a hive of military and construction activity, and Sawsan can't come close to the fence.

While it is far too early to say whether years of hostile relations between the two countries will improve, the changes in Syria have sparked hope for divided families that maybe, just maybe, they might be able to meet again.

"This thing gave us a hope … that we can see each other. That all the people in the same situation can meet their families," said another sister, 53-year-old Amira Safadi.

Yet seeing Sawsan across the hill, just a short walk away, is also incredibly painful for the sisters.

They wept as they waved, and cried even more when their sister put their nephew, 24-year-old Karam, on the phone. They have only met him once, during a family reunion in Jordan. He was 2 years old.

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts in the heart," Amira Safadi said. "It's so close and far at the same time. It is like she is here and we cannot reach her, we cannot hug her." *—PTI*

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

SALAR سالار

1,300 Hajj pilgrims died in 2024 from extreme heat

But this year, more than 1,300 pilgrims never made it home. Lethal heat combined with humidity proved deadly.

Our new research shows the upper limits of human heat tolerance were breached for a total of 43 hours over the six days of Hajj. During these periods, heat and humidity passed beyond the point at which our bodies are able to cool down.

Scientists are increasingly worried about the death toll caused by humid heatwaves, and how it will escalate in the near-term. This year is now the hottest year on record, overtaking the previous hottest year of 2023. As the planet gets hotter, it is also becoming more humid in many places, including arid Saudi Arabia. Since 1979, periods of extreme humid heat have more than doubled in frequency globally, increasing the chance of lethal events like this.

To do the Hajj, you have to walk between six and 21 kilometres each day. Many pilgrims are older and not in good health, making them more vulnerable to heat stress. This year's pilgrimage started on June 14. Over the next six days, the temperature topped 51°C, while "wet-bulb temperatures" (the combination of temperature and humidity) rose as high as 29.5°C.

June is typically the driest month in Saudi Arabia with average relative humidity around 25 per cent and wet-bulb temperatures averaging 22°C. But during this year's Hajj, humidity averaged 33 per cent and rose as high as 75 per cent during the most extreme periods of heat stress. Our research shows heat tolerance limits for older adults were breached on all six days of Hajj, including four prolonged periods of more than six hours. On one ferocious day, 18 June, humid heat hit levels considered dangerous even for young and healthy pilgrims. The points at which wet-bulb temperatures enter the lethal zone depend on the exact combinations of temperature and humidity, because our bodies respond differently to dry or humid heat.

Saudi authorities have installed air-conditioned shelters and other cooling methods. But these are only available to pilgrims with official permits. Most of those who died did not have permits, meaning they could not access cool relief.

The pilgrimage will be even more dangerous in the future. In 25 years time, the timing of Hajj will cycle back to peak summer in August and September. At 2°C of warming, the risk of heatstroke during Hajj would be ten times higher.

In 2010, researchers first proposed a theoretical "survival limit", which is a wet-bulb temperature of 35°C.

But we now know the true limit is actually much lower. Experiments testing human physiological limits inside controlled heat chambers, backed up by sophisticated models, have revealed new heat tolerance limits.

These limits vary depending on your age and how humid it is. For example, the tolerance limit for young people is around 45°C at 25 per cent humidity but only 34°C at 80 per cent humidity. For older people, the limits are lower still – 32.5°C at 80 per cent humidity is dangerous. These limits are the point at which it is too hot and humid for your body to cool itself down, even at rest. Sustained exposure leads to your core body temperature rising, heatstroke and after a number of hours, death.

Humidity comes from evaporation off oceans and large bodies of water. As climate change heats up the oceans, they produce more moisture. That means coastal regions – home to many of the world's largest cities – are vulnerable. That's why arid Saudi Arabia and other nations on the Arabian Peninsula are particularly at risk – they are surrounded by shallow, warming seas. The threat of humid heat is set to worsen sharply. We are already seeing lethal humid heat in the Arabian Gulf, across Bangladesh, northern India and parts of Pakistan, and in Southeast Asia. People are dying from these events, but the extent is poorly documented. Heatwaves this year closed schools in the Philippines, India and Bangladesh and killed dozens during India's election.

Without a rapid phase out of fossil fuels, we could see lethal humid heat hit multiple times a year in every major economy, including the United States, India, China, South America, Europe and large parts of Africa. We like to think we can adapt to change. But there is a hard limit to our ability to adapt to lethal humidity and heat. The deaths during the Hajj warn us that lethal humid heat is not fiction.

It's yet another reason to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions by ending our reliance on fossil fuels. *—PTI*

The upper limits of human heat tolerance were breached for a total of 43 hours over the six days of Hajj
PHOTO: PTI

US states could see crypto policy blitz in 2025 in spite of risks

The new year will usher in the bitcoin-friendly administration of US president-elect Donald Trump and an expanding lobbying effort in statehouses that, together, could push states to become more open to crypto and for public pension funds and treasuries to buy into it.

Proponents of the uniquely volatile commodity argue it is a valuable hedge against inflation, similar to gold.

Many bitcoin enthusiasts and investors are quick to criticise government-backed currencies as prone to devaluation and say increased government buy-in will stabilise bitcoin's future price swings, give it more legitimacy and further boost an already rising price.

But the risks are significant. Critics say a crypto investment is highly speculative, with so much unknown about projecting its future returns, and warn that investors should be prepared to lose money.

Only a couple public pension funds have invested in cryptocurrency and a new US Government Accountability Office study on 401(k) plan investments in crypto, issued in recent days, warned it has "uniquely high volatility" and that it found no standard approach for projecting the future returns of crypto.

It has already been a landmark year for crypto, with bitcoin hitting USD 100,000, the US Securities and Exchange Commission approving the first exchange-traded funds that hold bitcoin and crypto enthusiasts being cheered by Trump's promise to make the United States the "bitcoin superpower" of the world.

More legislation on crypto could be coming

Lawmakers in more states can expect to see bills in 2025 to make them crypto-friendly as analysts say crypto is becoming a powerful lobby, bitcoin miners build new installations and venture capitalists underwrite a growing tech sector that caters to cryptocurrencies.Meanwhile, a new crypto-friendly federal government under Trump and Congress could consider legislation from Sen. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyoming, to create a federal bitcoin reserve on which states can piggyback.

A bill introduced last month in Pennsylvania's House of Representatives sought to authorize the state's treasurer and public pension funds to invest in bitcoin. It went nowhere before the legislative session ended, but it caused a stir. "I had a friend who is a rep down the road text me, Oh my god, I'm getting so many emails and phone calls to my office,' more than he ever did about any other bill," said the measure's sponsor, Republican Mike Cabell.

Critics say a crypto investment is highly speculative, with so much unknown about projecting its future returns, and warn that investors should be prepared to lose money
PHOTO: PTI

Cabell — a bitcoin enthusiast who lost his reelection bid — expects his bill to be reintroduced by a colleague. And leaders of bitcoin advocacy group Satoshi Action say they expect bills based on their model bill to be introduced in at least 10 other states next year.

Keith Brainard, research director for the National Association of State Retirement Administrators, said he doesn't expect many public pension fund investment professionals, who oversee nearly USD 6 trillion in assets, to invest in crypto.

Pension fund professionals take risks they deem to be appropriate, but bitcoin investing has a short track record, might only fit into a niche asset class and may not fit the risk-to-reward profile they seek. In Louisiana, Treasurer John Fleming helped make the state the first to introduce a system by which people can pay a government agency in cryptocurrencies.

Fleming said he's not trying to promote cryptocurrency, but rather sees the step as a recognition that government must innovate and be flexible in helping people make financial transactions with the state. He said he would never invest his money, or the state's, in crypto.

Fleming recalled meeting with a bitcoin lobbyist recently and came away unconvinced that bitcoin makes for a good investment.

"My concern is that at some point it'll stop growing and then people will want to cash in," Fleming said. "And when they do, it could tank the value of a bitcoin."

In Pennsylvania, Treasury Department officials said they have the authority to decide for themselves if cryptocurrencies meet the agency's investment standards under state law and don't need new legislation.

Still, a highly volatile asset is ill-suited to the agency's need for predictability, considering it writes millions of checks a year. The overwhelming majority of the roughly $60 billion it invests at any given time is in short-term, conservative investments designed for an investment period of months, officials there said.

Pension boards, which invest on a 30-year time horizon, may already hold small investments in companies involved in mining, trading and storing cryptocurrencies. But they have been slow to embrace bitcoin. Pension boards got investment tools they like this year when the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission approved the first exchange-traded funds that hold bitcoin and, in October, approved listings of options on those funds, Palmer said.

Many "are likely in the process of getting up to speed on what it means to invest in bitcoin and kicking the tires, so to speak, and that's a process that typically takes a while at the institutional level," Palmer said. Several major asset managers like BlackRock, Invesco and Fidelity have bitcoin ETFs. In May, the State of Wisconsin Investment Board became the first state to invest when it bought USD 160 million worth of shares in two ETFs, or about 0.1 per cent of its assets. It later scaled back that investment to USD 104 million in one ETF, as of 30 September. A spokesperson declined to discuss it.

Michigan's state investment board later reported about USD 18 million in bitcoin ETF purchases while a candidate for New Jersey governor, Steven Fulop, said that if elected he would push the state's pension fund to invest in crypto. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Pak security forces kill 11 terrorists in Khyber

PESHAWAR, 19 DEC

Pakistani security forces gunned down 11 terrorists in three separate operations in the restive northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, authorities have said. The operations took place in various regions of the province on 17 and 18 December. The third quarter (July-September) of 2024 saw a sharp increase in fatalities of terrorist violence and counter-terrorism campaigns in Pakistan, with a 90 per cent surge in violence, according to a report issued by the Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS). A total of 722 people were killed, including civilians, security personnel, and outlaws, while 615 others were wounded in as many as 328 incidents recorded during the period under review. *—PTI*

2 highway crashes in Afghanistan kill 50, 76 injured

KABUL, 19 DEC

Two highway crashes in southeastern Afghanistan have killed a combined total of 50 people and injured 76, a government spokesman said Thursday. One was a collision between a passenger bus and an oil tanker on the Kabul-Kandahar highway late Wednesday, said Hafiz Omar, a spokesman for the governor of Ghazni province. The other was in a different area of the same highway, which connects the Afghan capital with the south. "The injured have been taken to hospitals in Ghazni and authorities are in the process of handing over the bodies to families," said Omar. Patients in a more serious condition were transferred to Kabul. Women and children are among the casualties, he added. Traffic accidents are common in Afghanistan, mainly due to poor road conditions and driver carelessness. *—PTI*

Lanka lifts vehicles import ban for first time in 4 years

COLOMBO, 19 DEC

Sri Lanka has announced that they will lift the vehicles import ban which was put in place in 2020 to ease the pressure on foreign exchange reserves due to the Covid-19 pandemic. By the gazette issued on Wednesday the importation of public transport vehicles have been allowed for the first time since early 2020. The Ministry of Finance said the policy to ban vehicle imports was implemented with the intention of easing the pressure on foreign exchange reserves due to the Covis-19 pandemic and the economic downturn of 2022. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake addressing Parliament on Wednesday said the importing cars for private use will be allowed from February 2025. However, the decision is subject to rules so as to protect the island nation's effort to build foreign reserves. *—PTI*

Indian in US pleads guilty to sexual harassment

WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

Indian national Kirtan Patel, 24,has pleaded guilty to attempting to entice a minor to engage in sexual activity, a US attorney said on Wednesday. Patel, who lives in Florida, faces a minimum penalty of 10 years, up to life, in federal prison. According to the plea agreement, between 22 May and 24 May, Patel communicated online with someone whom he believed was a 13-year-old girl. The person, however, was an undercover Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) special agent. Patel engaged in a sexually-explicit conversation with the undercover agent. Ultimately, Patel was arrested when he travelled to a location in Marion County to engage in sexual activity with the child. *—PTI*

Pak fumes as US sanctions 4 firms over missile making

Pak accuses US of double standards, says sanctions are biased

ISLAMABAD, 19 DEC

Pakistan on Thursday termed as "unfortunate and biased" the US decision to sanction its commercial entities for alleged involvement in ballistic missile programme.

After the US designated its four entities for sanctions, Foreign Office (FO) said the sanction defies the objective of peace and security by aiming to accentuate military asymmetries and claimed that "double standards and discriminatory practices undermine the credibility of non-proliferation regimes."

The US on Wednesday designated four entities for sanctions which targets proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, the State Department said.

These include the state-owned Islamabad-based flagship aerospace and defence agency National Development Complex (NDC), and three Karachi-based entities, Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International and Rockside Enterprise.

Pakistan said its strategic capabilities are meant to defend its sovereignty and preserve peace and stability in South Asia *PHOTO: X*

Pakistan said its strategic capabilities are meant to defend its sovereignty and preserve peace and stability in South Asia.

FO declared that Pakistan's strategic programme is a sacred trust bestowed by 240 million people upon its leadership and the sanctity of this trust, has been held in the highest esteem across the entire political spectrum, cannot be compromised.

"We also regret the imposition of sanctions on private commercial entities. Similar listings of commercial entities in the past were based on mere doubts and suspicion without any evidence whatsoever," FO said.

It maintained that while claiming strict adherence to non-proliferation norms, licensing requirements for advanced military technology to other countries have been waived off in the past.

According to the State Department, the NDC is responsible for Pakistan's ballistic missile programme and has worked to acquire items to advance Pakistan's long range ballistic missile programme, while the other three have worked to supply equipment and missile applicable items to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme, including its long-range missile programme. *—PTI*

5 Pakistanis killed, 35 missing as boat sinks in Greece

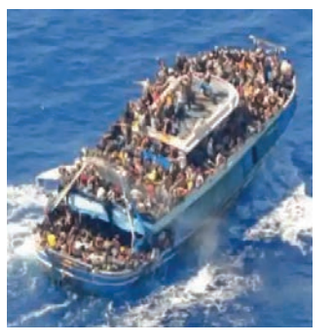
ISLAMABAD, 19 DEC

A tragic incident off Greece's Gavdos island has claimed the lives of five Pakistani nationals, with 35 others presumed dead after a migrant boat sank over the weekend. Reports indicate that at least seven people have died, while over 150 were rescued from the overcrowded vessel carrying more than 200 migrants. The Greek authorities have since suspended their rescue operations for the missing individuals.

Confirming the fatalities, Pakistani officials noted the victims hailed from Punjab, specifically two from Pasrur, with one each from Gujrat, Narowal, and Mandi Bahauddin. The cases against suspects involved in smuggling these individuals from Punjab to Libya have been registered by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), which has detained four people as part of its investigation.

In response to the tragedy, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has demanded stringent action against human trafficking and called for a report on similar incidents involving Pakistani citizens over the past year. Notably, 262 Pakistanis lost their lives in a comparable incident in the same region last year.

The Prime Minister emphasised the need for implementing the Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) and enhancing international collaboration to prevent such disasters. *—PTI*



S Korea vetoes Oppn's bills deepening turmoil

SEOUL, 19 DEC

South Korea's acting leader, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, has vetoed a series of contentious bills proposed by the opposition Democratic Party, exacerbating political tensions following the National Assembly's impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol.

The ruling and opposition parties are at loggerheads over the extent of authority Han has assumed since the suspension of Yoon's presidential powers after his brief martial law declaration on 3 December. The Constitutional Court is set to decide Yoon's fate, while law enforcement is probing potential rebellion charges against him, leading to the arrests of his defence minister and several military commanders.

Among the vetoed bills were measures to increase state support for agriculture and fisheries, with the Grain Management Act—requiring the government to purchase surplus rice—drawing strong criticism from Han. Another contentious proposal, the National Assembly Testimony Appraisal Act, aimed to enhance legislative powers to summon individuals for hearings, which Han argued could violate privacy rights. *—PTI*

Russia set for a missile duel with US: Putin

MOSCOW, 19 DEC

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday suggested a missile 'duel' with the United States that would show how Russia's new Oreshnik hypersonic ballistic missile could defeat any U.S. missile defence system.

Putin boasted that his military operation in Ukraine has strengthened Russia and denied that the downfall of a key ally in Syria had dented Moscow's prestige, as he sought to project strength and ease at his annual news conference and call-in show Thursday.

As is typical, the Russian leader used the tightly choreographed event, which usually lasts hours, to reinforce his authority and demonstrate a sweeping command of everything from consumer prices to military hardware.

A Grad self-propelled 122 mm multiple rocket launcher fires toward Ukrainian position at an undisclosed location *PHOTO: PTI*

UNSC told N Korean missiles used by Russia in Ukraine

North Korea demonstrated this year that it could produce ballistic missiles and supply them to Russia for use against Ukraine in a matter of months, the head of a research organisation that traces weapons used in the war said on Wednesday. Jonah Leff told the UN Security Council that researchers on the ground examined remnants of four missiles from North Korea recovered in Ukraine in July and August, including one that had marks indicating it was produced in 2024.

"This is the first public evidence of missiles having been produced in North Korea and then used in Ukraine within a matter of months, not years," he said. *—Agencies*

US funding plan fails as Trump makes new demands days before shutdown

WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

President-elect Donald Trump has rejected a bipartisan government funding plan, demanding House Speaker Mike Johnson and Republicans renegotiate just days ahead of a potential government shutdown. In a statement, Trump, alongside Vice President-elect JD Vance, insisted that "Republicans must GET SMART and TOUGH", proposing a controversial combination of continued funding and an increase in the national debt limit, which many in his party oppose.

Democrats condemned the GOP's shift, with House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries asserting that "House Republicans will now own any harm that is visited upon the American people". The proposal, which included USD 100.4 billion in disaster aid for states affected by recent hurricanes, was rejected by hard-right conservatives, supported by Trump's ally Elon Musk.

Mike Johnson and Donald Trump *PHOTO: X*

As Republicans grapple with internal divisions, the situation highlights the challenges ahead for Johnson, who must navigate party dynamics while relying heavily on Trump's influence to push legislative initiatives through Congress.

Senate passes defense bill to raise troop pay

The Senate has approved a defence bill that facilitates a 14.5 per cent pay rise for junior enlisted service members and allocates USD 895 billion for military spending.

The bill received a substantial majority, passing 85-14, despite opposition from eleven senators affiliated with the Democrats and three Republicans. *—PTI*

US federal reserve cuts interest rates by 0.25%

WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

The US Federal Reserve in continuing the rate cut cycle cut the interest rate by 25 basis points, according to an official statement following the key FOMC meeting.

The US Federal Reserve has lowered its target range for the federal funds bringing it down to 4.25 per cent- 4.5 per cent.

It said "In support of its goals, the Committee decided to lower the target range for the federal funds rate by 1/4 percentage point to 4-1/4 to 4-1/2 per cent".

The fed noted that the move, aimed at supporting economic growth and achieving the central bank's long-term goals of maximum employment and a 2 per cent inflation rate, was announced after the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting.

Despite the anticipated rate cut, the announcement did not bring cheer to the US stock markets. Instead, major indices tumbled, reflecting investor concerns about the economic outlook.

The S&P 500 plunged by 2.95 per cent, losing 178 points to close at 5,872.

Meanwhile, the tech-heavy Nasdaq dropped by 3.28 per cent, shedding 658 points to settle at 19,450.

In its statement, the Federal Reserve highlighted that it would carefully evaluate incoming economic data, risks, and future developments before making additional adjustments to the interest rates. *—PTI*

Sen. Richard Blumenthal *PHOTO: X*

'US plan to curb China's, Russia's chip access failed'

WASHINGTON, 19 DEC

A report from the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations has declared the Commerce Department's measures to restrict China's and Russia's access to advanced American-made computer chips as "inadequate." The report highlights that the government effort requires more funding to effectively prevent these nations from enhancing their military capabilities.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine nearly three years ago, the Biden administration imposed strict export controls to limit access to US chips. However, the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) lacks the necessary resources for adequate enforcement and has become overly reliant on voluntary compliance from US chip manufacturers.

Despite concerns, the incoming Trump administration appears focused on scaling down government departments. President-elect Donald Trump has selected entrepreneurs Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy to oversee a new "Department of Government Efficiency," potentially hindering agency support. *—PTI*

9 KILLED

Houthis have battled the Saudi-led coalition in the wider Yemen war, which has killed more than 1,50,000 people, including civilians *PHOTO: PTI*

Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen's port, Houthi-held capital

DUBAI, 19 DEC

A series of intense Israeli airstrikes shook Yemen's rebel-held capital and a port city on Thursday and killed at least nine people, officials said, shortly after a Houthi missile targeted central Israel.

Thursday's strikes risk further escalating conflict with the Iranian-backed Houthis, whose attacks on the Red Sea corridor have impacted global shipping. The rebels have so far avoided the same level of intense military strikes that have targeted Hamas and Hezbollah.

The Houthi-controlled satellite channel al-Masirah said that some of the strikes targeted power stations in the capital, as well as the Ras Isa oil terminal on the Red Sea. The channel said that at least seven people had been killed at the nearby port of Salif, while another two had been killed at the Ras Isa oil terminal.

Rebel-held Hodeida, about 145 km southwest of Sanaa, has been key for food shipments into Yemen as its decade-long war has gone on.

The strikes happened just after Israel's military said that its air force intercepted a missile launched from Yemen before it entered the country's territory.

The Houthis have targeted about 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023.

Israel's offensive in Gaza has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians.

The Houthis have battled the Saudi-led coalition in the wider Yemen war, which has killed more than 1,50,000 people, including civilians. *—PTI*

FRANCE CELEBRATES

Man who drugged & let 50 men rape wife gets 20-yr jail

AVIGNON, 19 DEC

A court in France on Thursday sentenced the ex-husband of Gisèle Pelicot and 50 others to a maximum 20 years of imprisonment for drugging and raping her and allowing other men to rape her while she was knocked out, in abuse that lasted nearly a decade.

The sentence against Dominique Pelicot was declared after he was found guilty of all charges against him. At age 72, it could mean that he spends the rest of his life in prison.

The verdict was read by the lead judge of the court in Avignon, Roger Arata. The historic case has profoundly shaken France over the past several months.

Dominique admitted that for years he knocked his then wife of 50 years out with drugs so that he and strangers he recruited online could abuse her while he filmed the assaults.

The appalling ordeal inflicted over nearly a decade on Gisèle, now a 72-year-old grandmother, in what she thought was a loving marriage and her courage during the bruising and stunning trial have transformed the retired power company worker into a feminist hero of the nation.

Stretching over more than three months, the trial galvanised campaigners against sexual violence and spurred calls for tougher measures to stamp out rape culture.

Prosecutors asked that he get the maximum penalty and for sentences of 10 to 18 years for the others. They also requested a four-year prison term for another defendant who was tried for aggravated sexual assault.

Of the 50 men accused of rape, just one was acquitted but was found guilty of aggravated sexual assault. The defendants were all accused of having taken part in Dominique Pelicot's sordid rape and abuse fantasies that were acted out in the couple's retirement home in the small Provence town of Mazan and elsewhere.

Pelicot testified that he hid tranquilisers in food and drink that he gave his then wife, knocking her out so profoundly that he could do what he wanted to her for hours.

One of the men was on trial not for assaulting Gisèle Pelicot but for drugging and raping his own wife — with the help and drugs from Dominique Pelicot, who was also tried for raping the other man's wife. Dominique first came to the attention of police in September 2020, when a supermarket security guard caught him surreptitiously filming up women's skirts.

Police subsequently found his library of homemade images documenting years of abuse inflicted on his wife. *—PTI*

> "I want to express my gratitude, very profound, to all the people who supported me during this difficult time. Your witness, your statements, have really moved me and they have given me the strength to come back every day for these long days of the trial
>
> —Gisele Pelicot

Gisele Pelicot, now a 72-year-old grandmother, has transformed into a feminist hero of the nation *PHOTO: X*

PHOTO: PTI

Gold, silver prices dip as US Fed signals 2 rate cuts

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Gold and silver prices fell sharply in the national capital on Thursday due to a muted demand by jewellers amid a weak global trend, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity plunged Rs 800 to Rs 78,300 per 10 grams. It closed at Rs 79,100 per 10 grams in the previous trading session on Wednesday. Traders said the bullion prices slipped as the US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell takes a stance after the US central bank decided to cut interest rates. Silver also plummeted Rs 2,000 to Rs 90,000 per kg on Thursday. The white metal settled at Rs 92,000 per kg in previous close. —*PTI*

Zydus gets USFDA nod for topical anaesthetic cream

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Zydus Lifesciences Ltd on Thursday said it has received final approval from the US health regulator to manufacture its generic topical anaesthetic Lidocaine and Prilocaine cream. The approval granted by the US Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) for Lidocaine and Prilocaine cream 2.5 per cent/2.5 per cent, Zydus Lifesciences Ltd said in a regulatory filing.Lidocaine and Prilocaine cream is indicated as a topical anaesthetic for use on normal intact skin for local analgesia and genital mucous membranes for superficial minor surgery and as pretreatment for infiltration anaesthesia, it added. The cream will be produced at the group's topical manufacturing site at Changodar, Ahmedabad, it added. The company said Lidocaine and Prilocaine cream had annual sales of USD 22.05 million in the US as of October 2024. —*PTI*

'50% of Indians booked flights last minute in 2024'

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The year 2024 witnessed a rise in spontaneous travel among Indian international travellers, with nearly half of them making last-minute plans, barely less than a week before their departure, says a new report. The study conducted by travel-banking fintech platform Niyo reveals the evolving mindset of Indian travellers, who are embracing flexibility, prioritising experiences and benefiting from streamlined travel proceses.

"Forty eight percent of international flight bookings by Indians this year were made just 0–7 days before travel. This trend was supported by easier travel access, with 58 countries offering visa-free or visa-on-arrival options to Indian passport holders," reads the report findings. Dubai, which according to the report was by far the most preferred destination , attracted 45 per cent of holidaymakers with its luxurious shopping and entertainment.—*PTI*

World Ayurveda Congress gets deals worth ₹1,275 cr

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The 10th World Ayurveda Congress and Arogya Expo 2024 which concluded here earlier this week clinched business deals worth nearly Rs 1,275 crore (USD 150 million), reflecting an increasing global demand for Ayurvedic medicines and wellness products. Meanwhile, the flagship biennial conclave of the Ayurveda fraternity and allied stakeholders, held from 12-15 December, broke all previous records in the volume of business achieved as 142 buyers from 30 countries took part in about 3200 B2B meetings, facilitated by Ayush Export Promotion Council (AYUSHEXIL) at the event.—*PTI*

Mkt slumps on US Fed's fewer rate cuts next year

Sun Pharma and Hindustan Unilever are the gainers

MUMBAI, 19 DEC

Equity benchmark Sensex on Thursday plunged about 965 points to crash below the 80,000 level due to heavy selling in global equities after the US Federal Reserve signalled fewer rate cuts next year.

Besides, deep losses in consumer durables, banking and IT stocks amid foreign fund outflows added to the gloom, analysts said.

Falling for the fourth day running, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tanked 964.15 points or 1.20 per cent to settle at 79,218.05. During the day, the blue-chip index cracked 1,162.12 points or 1.44 per cent to 79,020.08.

The NSE Nifty tumbled 247.15 points or 1.02 per cent to sink below the 24,000 mark at 23,951.70. "The Indian market saw a widespread decline following a global sell-off driven by the US Fed's hawkish stance on interest rates. Sectors sensitive to interest rates, such as banking and real estate, significantly bore the brunt. "However, the BoJ's decision to keep its interest rate steady, which surprised economists, aided in reducing the selling pressure. Despite this, investor caution persisted amid ongoing FII selling, with a strategic shift towards defensive sectors like pharma as evidenced by their outperformance," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. From the 30 blue-chip pack, Infosys, Bajaj Finserv, JSW Steel, Bajaj Finance, Asian Paints, ICICI Bank, Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services, Infosys, Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra were the biggest laggards.

On the other hand, Sun Pharma, Power Grid and Hindustan Unilever were the gainers. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower.

European markets were trading in the negative territory. Wall Street ended sharply lower on Wednesday.

Sensex tanks 964.15 points or 1.20 per cent to settle at 79,218.05 PHOTO: PTI

Foreign Institutional Investors offloaded equities worth Rs 1,316.81 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.08 per cent to USD 3.33 a barrel.

BSE benchmark Sensex tumbled 502.25 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 80,182.20, taking its downtrend to the third day on Wednesday. —*PTI*

Genesis to buy stake in SpiceJet to settle $16M dispute

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Airline SpiceJet has settled dispute of over USD 16M with Dublin-headquartered Genesis Aircraft Services, commercial aircraft leasing company, the company said on Thursday.

Under the agreement, SpiceJet will pay Genesis USD 6M and Genesis will acquire USD 4M in SpiceJet equity at a price of Rs 100 per share, the company added.

The agreement will also result in a significant saving for the airline as it navigates a robust path toward long-term growth.

The settlement with Genesis underscores SpiceJet's continued commitment to restoring financial stability, achieving operational resilience, and reducing legal liabilities. Subject to the settlement terms being satisfied, both parties have agreed to withdraw all ongoing litigations and disputes related to this matter at the appropriate forums. SpiceJet Chairman and Managing Director Ajay Singh said, "This settlement marks another crucial step in our journey towards financial stability. We are pleased to have resolved this matter amicably with Genesis through constructive negotiations. This agreement, which includes Genesis acquiring equity stake in SpiceJet, will significantly reduce our financial liabilities and further strengthen our balance sheet."

The settlement follows a series of successful resolutions with other lessors, including Horizon Aviation, Engine Lease Finance Corporation, Aircastle, Wilmington Trust SP, Shannon Engine Support Limited and Export Development Canada.

In September 2024, Carlyle Aviation agreed to convert USD 30M of lease arrears into SpiceJet equity at INR 100 per share, signalling increasing confidence from stakeholders in the airline's financial and operational recovery.

The recent financial progress of SpiceJet, the country's one of the largest regional players, has been recognised by Acuite Ratings and Research Limited, which recently upgraded the airline's credit rating by four notches. —*ANI*

SEBI introduces timelines for NFO fund deployment

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Markets regulator SEBI has decided to introduce timelines for deploying funds raised through New Fund Offers (NFOs) by asset management companies (AMCs) and relaxed regulatory framework regarding the alignment of AMC employees' interests with those of unitholders.

Additionally, the regulator has mandated disclosure of stress testing for all mutual fund schemes to provide greater transparency to investors.

These proposals, approved by SEBI's board on Wednesday, aimed at enhancing operational flexibility for mutual funds while ensuring greater accountability and trust among investors.

Regarding deployment timelines, SEBI said that fund managers must deploy funds collected during an NFO as per the specified asset allocation of the scheme, typically within 30 days.

PHOTO:X

If funds are not deployed within the specified timeline, investors will have the option to exit the scheme without paying an exit load, through regulator said in a statement.

The framework discourages AMCs from collecting excess funds during NFOs, as investors can invest in open-ended schemes later at the prevailing Net Asset Value (NAV). —*PTI*

Adani rolls out new campaign to recover from bribery scandal

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Billionaire Gautam Adani's conglomerate on Thursday unveiled a new version of its 'Hum Karke Dikhate Hai' campaign as it looks to bounce back from the damning indictment by the US authorities in an alleged bribery case.

"Building on the success of its previous edition, this multi-media, multi-platform campaign moves beyond the conventional corporate strategy of emphasising statistics and figures to focus on inspiring human-interest stories. These narratives showcase the profound, positive impact of Adani's infrastructure projects on the lives of millions of Indians," the group said in a statement.

On 20 November, the United States Department of Justice and the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) issued an indictment and a civil complaint, respectively, in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, against chairman Gautam Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani and key executive Vneet Jaain. The charges relate to allegations of securities fraud, wire fraud and violation of the SEC guidelines that led to materially false and misleading statements in the bond offering documents of AGEL with respect to anti-bribery and anti-corruption policies.

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"The inaugural film of the campaign, 'Pehle Pankha Phir Bijli' (First Fan, Then Electricity), developed by Ogilvy India, tells the heartwarming story of a young boy who, against all odds believes a fan can bring electricity to his village. His faith is rewarded when he witnesses a majestic Adani wind turbine generator powering and illuminating his entire village with clean energy. —*PTI*

PHOTO:X

Nestlé: No impact from Swiss MFN withdrawal

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

FMCG major Nestle India on Thursday said the suspension of the MFN (most favoured nation) clause granted to India by Switzerland will have 'no impact' on the company.

The suspension of MFN status under the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) is a policy issue between the government of India and Switzerland and is not 'Nestle-specific', the FMCG firm said in a statement.

Nestle India, which owns popular brands such as Maggi, Nescafe and KitKat, said the company was already "deducting 10 per cent withholding tax" on cross-country payments.

Earlier on 11 December, the Swiss government had announced the suspension of the MFN status granted to India following a ruling by the Supreme Court of India, which in a judgement last year had said MFN status under the DTAA cannot be enforced unless notified under Section 90 of the Income Tax Act. This judgement of the apex court had come in a case related to Nestle, where it overturned an earlier order passed by the Delhi High Court in 2021, which had upheld the residual tax rates' applicability after considering the MFN clause in DTAA. This increased tax liabilities for companies having operations in Switzerland. —*PTI*

Airtel prepays ₹3K cr to govt, clearing all dues

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Bharti Airtel has prepaid Rs 3,626 crore to the Department of Telecom to clear all its liabilities for spectrum it had acquired in 2016, the company said on Thursday.

With this payment, Bharti Airtel has now prepaid all its spectrum dues that had interest costs higher than 8.65 per cent, the company said in a statement.

"Bharti Airtel has prepaid Rs 3,626 crore to the Department of Telecom (Government of India) clearing all its liabilities for spectrum it had acquired in 2016," the statement said.

Airtel has prepaid a total of Rs 28,320 crore of spectrum liabilities this calendar year, the company said. —*PTI*

US Amazon workers to strike over labour contract

WASHINGTON DC, 19 DEC

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters said workers at seven Amazon facilities went on a strike from Thursday morning, an effort by the union to pressure the e-commerce company for a labour agreement during a key shopping period.

The Teamsters say the workers, who authorised strikes in the past few days, are joining the picket line after Amazon ignored a 15 December deadline the union set for contract negotiations. Amazon says it doesn't expect an impact on its operations during what the union calls the largest strike against the company in US history.

The Teamsters say they represent nearly 10,000 workers at 10 Amazon facilities, a small portion of the 1.5M people Amazon employs in its warehouses and corporate offices.

At one warehouse in New York City's Staten Island borough, thousands of workers voted for the Amazon Labour Union in 2022 and have since affiliated with the Teamsters. At the other facilities, employees have unionised with them by demonstrating majority support but without holding government-administered elections.

The strikes on Thursday are taking place at one Amazon warehouse in San Francisco, California, and six delivery stations in southern California, New York City; Atlanta, Georgia, and Skokie, Illinois, according to the union's announcement. Amazon workers at the other facilities are "prepared to join," the union said. —*PTI*

AHEAD OF GST MEET

Experts want higher 'Sin Tax' on tobacco

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Ahead of a crucial GST Council meeting on tax rationalisation health and economic experts have called for a higher 'Sin Tax' on tobacco and similar harmful products to curb their consumption and bolster public health and the economy.

At a webinar organised by 'Tobacco Free India', a citizens' initiative, experts endorsed the recent recommendation by the Group of Ministers (GoM) for a 35 per cent 'Sin Tax' slab on tobacco products, up from the current 28 per cent.

They argued that increasing taxes on tobacco would not only save lives but also strengthen the economy and advance the vision of a healthy and Viksit Bharat.

PHOTO: X

They emphasised that this step would curb tobacco consumption and fund preventive healthcare initiatives.

"Tobacco-related diseases place an unsustainable burden on India's health system. Tax hikes have proven globally effective in reducing tobacco consumption," said Dr Alok Thakar, Head of the National Cancer Institute, Govt. of India and Professor at AIIMS, New Delhi.

The GST Council, chaired by Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Chaudhary, is scheduled to meet on 21 December to deliberate on the GoM's proposals.

These include introducing a new 35 per cent slab for Sin Goods like tobacco and aerated drinks while reducing GST rates on essential goods like notebooks, bottled water and bicycles as well as lowering premiums on health and life insurance.

- Experts argue that the increased revenue from Sin Goods could help offset these rate cuts, offering relief to citizens while advancing public health goals

Experts argue that the increased revenue from Sin Goods could help offset these rate cuts, offering relief to citizens while advancing public health goals. —*PTI*

Micromax, Phison to make storage chipsets in India

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

Electronics company Micromax and Taiwan's storage chip company Phison have set up a joint venture, MiPhi, to design and manufacture artificial intelligence-enabled storage chipsets modules in India, a senior Micromax official said.

Micromax Informatics Co-Founder Rahul Sharma said the company has started production at its Noida facility.

"Phison is a leader in NAND controller and NAND storage technologies. We have partnered with them to set up a joint venture in India, in which Micromax will have 55 per cent stake," Sharma said.

He said the firm will focus on designing storage chipsets for servers which is a very important element for any country from both security and strategic perspective.

"With this venture, we aim to bring down the cost of GPU by one-tenth... the lowest per token cost in the world. This will help us in disrupting the AI landscape not only in India but also in specific agreed-upon regions," Sharma said.

He said trials with few leading organisations in India will be completed this month and commercial shipments will begin in the first quarter of 2025.

"There are only a few companies providing storage solutions. It is important for India, which has no indigenous storage solutions company. Our joint venture will help reduce dependence on foreign technologies, as we will have our own design and manufacturing," Sharma said, adding that the company will hire freshers and train them on developing the storage technology. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

BCCI calls meeting to appoint electoral officer

NEW DELHI, 19 DEC

The BCCI has called an emergent meeting of its Apex Council on Friday to appoint former chief election commissioner Achal Kumar Jyoti as the electoral officer to conduct the polls for the positions of secretary and treasurer. The two posts were recently vacated by Jay Shah (secretary) and Ashish Shelar (treasurer). While Shah took charge as ICC chairman on 1 December, Shelar took oath as a cabinet minister in the new Maharashtra government. The BCCI also needs to appoint an electoral officer at least four weeks prior to the election, as per the constitution. Currently, Devajit Saikia is performing the duties of Board's interim secretary, while the treasurer's position is lying vacant. Meanwhile, BCCI's healthy bank balance got healthier this year with an approximate increase of Rs 4200 crore, taking the overall earnings to Rs 20,686 crore. *—PTI*

Friedkin purchases Premier League team Everton

LONDON, 19 DEC

The Texas-based Friedkin Group completed its 98.8 per cent purchase of Everton on Thursday, adding the storied Premier League club to its wide-ranging portfolio of investments including Italian team Roma. It ends a long period of huge uncertainty at Everton, a nine-time English champion which has been an ever-present in the top division since 1954 but is without a major trophy since 1995. Fronted by Dan Friedkin and his son Ryan, the group has investments in the automotive industry, entertainment, hospitality and sports. The Friedkins made a fortune distributing Toyotas in Texas. They take over from Everton's majority shareholder, Farhad Moshiri, who has been at the club since 2016 but hasn't brought any success despite spending hundreds of millions of pounds on players. *—PTI*

Madrid beat Pachuca, bag Ancelotti 15th title

LUSAIL, 19 DEC

Real Madrid beat Mexican team Pachuca 3–0 in the Intercontinental Cup final on Wednesday, making Carlo Ancelotti the most decorated coach in the club's history.

Ancelotti lifted his 15th title with the Spanish powerhouse, surpassing the 14 trophies that he and Miguel Muñoz had won. Muñoz coached the team in the 1960s and 70s.

"Very happy, it's a triumph," said the 65-year-old Ancelotti, who on Tuesday was named men's coach of the year at the FIFA's "The Best" awards. "We didn't get off to a good start but finished well, showing great attitude."

Kylian Mbappé, Rodrygo and Vinícius Júnior scored a goal each as Madrid became the most successful club in the competition with four titles. It also won in 1960, 1998 and 2002.

Pachuca has never won the tournament, which brings together the champions of all six soccer confederations.

The competition is being played in a new format after FIFA expanded the Club World Cup to 32 teams for 2025.

Madrid won the annual Club World Cup five times – in 2014, 2016, 2017–18 and 2022.

Eleven of Ancelotti's 15 titles with Madrid have come in his second stint with the club, which began in 2021. The other four, including a Champions League title, came during his time with Madrid from 2013 to 2015. *—PTI*

INDIA TO PLAY MATCHES AT NEUTRAL VENUE IN CT

Pakistan will also get a similar arrangement till 2027

DUBAI, 19 DEC

The deadlock over the hosting of next year's Champions Trophy finally ended on Thursday when the ICC announced that India will play their matches of the 50-over event at a neutral venue instead of host country Pakistan. Pakistan will also get a similar arrangement for tournaments to be held in India till 2027.

The agreement will also extend to the 2028 women's T20 World Cup, which will be held in Pakistan. Although no formal announcement has been made, but India's Champions Trophy matches are likely be held in the UAE.

The arrangement will also cover next year's women's World Cup in India and the T20 World Cup in 2026, to be jointly hosted by India and Sri Lanka.

India had refused to travel to Pakistan for the event scheduled in February-March due to security concerns. The Indians have not played in Pakistan since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks in which 150 people were killed.

India had refused to travel to Pakistan for the event scheduled in February-March due to security concerns *PHOTO: X*

Travelling to Pakistan also requires Indian government's clearance, which has remained firm on the status quo.

The decision, that came after a series of back-channel talks, was on expected lines after the sport's governing body maintained prolonged silence on the contentious matter during the previous set-up led by chairman Greg Barclay.

His successor Jay Shah took charge on 1 December and all stakeholders, including the Pakistan Cricket Board, the BCCI and the broadcasters, were running out of time to organise the 50-over event that was last played in the UK in 2017.

While BCCI's stance was always clear, the matter got stretched because of PCB's refusal to allow a "one-sided" arrangement of neutral venues. Led by Pakistan interior minister Mohsin Naqvi, the PCB was determined not to lose face in front of the local public.

PCB, which had sent its team to India for the ODI World Cup last year, had categorically opposed the hybrid model but eventually agreed to it on reciprocal grounds. *—PTI*

Red Bull picks Lawson as Verstappen's partner

MILTON KEYNES, 19 DEC

Liam Lawson will partner world champion Max Verstappen at Red Bull in 2025, the Formula 1 team said on Thursday.

Lawson, a New Zealander, replaces Sergio Perez, who was dropped on Wednesday after months of poor results.

The 22-year-old Lawson will switch from Racing Bulls, Red Bull's sister team, after racing as a replacement driver in 2023 and this year. He started in Red Bull's junior program.

"There's no doubt that racing alongside Max, a four-time champion and undoubtedly one of the greatest drivers ever seen in F1, is a daunting task," Red Bull team principal Christian Horner said, "but I'm sure Liam can rise to that challenge and deliver some outstanding results for us next year."

Lawson said it was a "lifelong dream" to be racing with Red Bull.

"This is something I've wanted and worked toward since I was eight years old," he said. "It's been an incredible journey so far."

Perez's contract was terminated two years early, the Mexican ditched after being rarely competitive this season. He had not won a race since April 2023 and the last time he finished higher than sixth in a grand prix was in May. Meanwhile, Verstappen continued to dominate F1.

—PTI

Liam Lawson *PHOTO: FB*

PSG beat Monaco, increase French league lead

MONACO, 19 DEC

Runaway leader Paris Saint-Germain opened a 10-point lead at the top of the French league standings before the year-end break with a 4–2 defeat of Monaco on Wednesday in a match marred by Gianluigi Donnarumma's injury.

Ousmane Dembélé scored a brace and striker Goncalo Ramos put PSG back in the lead with seven minutes left as he headed in a corner after coming in as a substitute in the lively encounter at the Stade Louis II.

Monaco remained in third place, level on points with second-place Marseille, which has one match in hand.

Donnarumma's face was bloodied after being hit by an opponent's cleat. The Italy international took the studs of Wilfried Singo's cleat in the 17th minute. Singo, whose shot had been blocked, tried to jump over the sliding Donnarumma but instead struck his face. Pictures showed that Donnarumma was cut below his right eye. Singo, who had already been warned, was lucky to avoid a red card.

Ousmane Dembélé *PHOTO: X*

Later, Singo apologised for his dangerous move. "My gesture was obviously not intentional, but I was able to see afterwards that he had a significant injury to his face," Singo wrote on social media, in a message posted in both French and Italian. *—PTI*

Arsenal, Liverpool form ELC semis line up

LONDON, 19 DEC

Arsenal, Newcastle and Liverpool advanced in the English League Cup (ELC) on Wednesday to ensure a heavyweight line up for the semi-finals.

PHOTO: X

Gabriel Jesus scored a hat trick – including a crucial second goal from an offside position — as Arsenal beat Crystal Palace 3–2 to reach the last four for the first time since the 2021–22 season.

There was luck for Jesus, as replays showed that he was offside when running through to score his goal that made it 2–1 in the 73rd minute at Emirates Stadium. However, there is no video review until the semi-finals of the competition so the goal wasn't ruled out.

Liverpool kept alive its title defence by winning 2–1 at Southampton, with Darwin Nunez and Harvey Elliott the scorers in the first half for the leaders of the Premier League and Champions League.

Newcastle defeated Brentford 3–1 mainly thanks to two first-half goals by Italy midfielder Sandro Tonali and progressed to the semi-finals for the second time in three seasons. *—PTI*

Richa, Mandhana in record books as India make 217/4

NAVI MUMBAI, 19 DEC

Richa Ghosh (54) equalled the world record for the fastest fifty in women's T20Is (18 balls) after Smriti Mandhana's (77) fireworks as India registered 217 for 4 in the series-deciding third and final match against the West Indies here on Thursday.

It was also India's highest-ever total in the shortest format, going past the 201/5 against the UAE in the Asia Cup earlier this year.

The 21-year-old Ghosh reached 54 off just 21 balls (3x4, 5x6), alongside equalling the record for the fastest fifty being jointly held by New Zealand's Sophie Devine and Australia's Phoebe Litchfield.

Ghosh's blitz came after Mandhana became the leading run-scorer in this format this year, reaching 763 runs in 23 T20Is, while smacking her third consecutive fifty of the series and eighth of the year.

She moved ahead of Sri Lanka captain Chamari Athapaththu in the run-scorer's list.

Having erred in the second game by not putting enough runs on the board, India rode on Mandhana's charge to get their runs at nearly 10 an over.

Her pull shots were as compelling as her strokes on the off-side, at times effortlessly clearing the in-field to stamp her authority.

Smriti Mandhana and Richa Ghosh during the 3rd T20 match between India and West Indies Women in Navi Mumbai on Thursday *PHOTO: PTI*

Mandhana's firework in the powerplay and beyond overshadowed Uma Chetry's two-ball duck in the first over and Rodrigues' slow start in which she also survived a leg-before review against Hayley Matthews.

However, Rodrigues picked up well after a slow start to make 28-ball 39 with four boundaries, building a robust platform for a big total as the two put on 98 runs off 55 balls.

At No 4, Raghvi Bisht (31 not out off 22 balls, 2x4s, 1x6s) made her first impression on international circuit when she danced down the track to clear Karishma Ramharack for her first boundary of the career — a six — and scored runs on both sides of the wicket.

Bisht played a perfect second fiddle to both Mandhana and Ghosh, adding 44 and 70 runs respectively with the senior batting partners while gaining crucial experience herself.

But Mandhana again missed a hundred, as she walked back to the hut after making 77 from 47 balls with 13 fours and a six. It was her highest score in this series, and she was dismissed in the 15th over by Deandra Dottin.

India then made the right move by sending in hard-hitter Ghosh ahead of Deepti Sharma, and the young wicketkeeper-batter once again dazzled. Ghosh showcased her prowess at the crease with powerful hits with the ball landing nearly into the stands, particularly on the leg side, with more than 40,000 in attendance here at the DY Patil Stadium. *—PTI*

Kohli gets into a spat with journalist at Melbourne Airport

BRISBANE, 19 DEC

Star India batter Virat Kohli got into a heated argument with a TV journalist upon his arrival at Melbourne Airport ahead of the fourth Border-Gavaskar Trophy Test starting from 26 December onwards.

As per Wisden, on Thursday, Australia's Channel 7 reported that Virat got into a heated exchange with a TV journalist, and shared pictures of Virat exchanging words with the journalist before walking away. Channel 7 suggested that "Kohli appeared to be upset by the presence of cameras directed at his family."

Kohli landed in Melbourne for the Boxing Day Test, a day after the conclusion of the third Test at Brisbane, which ended in a draw. The series is level at 1-1.

As per reports, Virat walked off, before turning back and exchanging a few words with the journalist.

The star batter and his wife, Bollywood actress Anushka Sharma, have been extremely protective of their family's privacy, especially during travel days and match days when they could get easy exposure to paparazzi and TV cameras. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Kohli to settle in London soon: Coach

Virat Kohli's childhood coach Rajkumar Sharma on Thursday confirmed that the cricketer, his wife Anushka Sharma and their children Vamika and Akaay are set to move to London soon. Sharma hinted that Kohli would be leaving India and shifting base to the UK, where he eventually plans on spending the rest of his life post-retirement. Over the last couple of years, Kohli has been spotted in London frequently; in fact, their son Akaay was born in the city earlier this year on 15 February. *—Agencies*

'INSTINCTIVE RETIREMENT'

R Ashwin returned to Chennai on Thursday, where he received a warm welcome with a shower of flower petals and a live band. As he entered his home, his parents embraced him and adorned him with a garland *PHOTO: PTI*

Ashwin was humiliated, says father; spinner plays it down as 'dad remark'

CHENNAI, 19 DEC

Just-retired R Ashwin's father Ravichandran kicked up a controversy on Thursday by claiming that "humiliation" could have been a reason for his son's decision to call it quits but the veteran off-spinner made light of the "dad comment", blaming it on lack of media training.

Ashwin dropped a bombshell on Wednesday when he announced his retirement from top-flight cricket at the end of the drawn third Test against Australia in Brisbane. He flew back to Chennai the same evening and was welcomed warmly by his family and friends here on Thursday. Although Ashwin described his decision as an "instinctive" call that was on his mind for a while, his father raised eyebrows by hinting at other factors, including humiliation. "I too came to know at the last minute. The way in which he gave that (retirement), there could be many reasons. Only Ashwin knows, maybe humiliation," Ravichandran told 'CNN News18'. Earlier, Ravichandran said the family was expecting Ashwin's retirement for some time because "humiliation was going on", though he didn't reveal the exact nature of it. Ashwin had told the media in Brisbane that he has a "bit of punch left" in him, hinting at reasons more than mere cricketing. India skipper Rohit Sharma revealed that he had a chat with Ashwin on the sidelines of the Perth Test and convinced him to stay for the day-night game. "...this was on his mind and there are obviously a lot of things that went behind it. When I arrived in Perth, this was a chat we had and I somehow convinced him to stay for that pink ball Test match," Rohit had revealed in his press conference on Wednesday. *—PTI*

"Then after that it just happened so that he felt that if I (Ashwin) am not needed right now in the series, I am better off saying goodbye to the game," he added. *—PTI*

FC GOA AIM TO END BAGAN'S UNBEATEN ISL RUN

MARGAO, 19 DEC

FC Goa will seek to snap a rampaging Mohun Bagan Super Giant's eight-match unbeaten streak in the Indian Super League (ISL) when the two sides square off in a 12th round match here on Friday.

FC Goa, under India head coach Manolo Marquez, will also aim to improve their record against the Mariners, having lost five of their eight meetings in the ISL, including a narrow 0–1 defeat in their most recent fixture in February.

Hyderabad FC sack Singto for poor show in ISL

Hyderabad FC have sacked head coach Thangboi Singto with immediate effect after the side's disappointing run so far in the Indian Super League (ISL) season.

Hyderabad FC are currently in the 12th spot on the points table, with two wins and a draw from 11 matches.

Punjab FC part ways with Bakenga

Punjab FC on Wednesday parted ways with Norwegian international striker Mushaga Bakenga just four months after he joined the Indian Super League (ISL) side.

The club did not cite any reason for the 32-year-old Congolese-origin player's departure after he was roped in August this year. *—PTI*